RUTHLESS DESIRES BOOK 5

cruel BETRAYAL

ELIRA FIRETHORN

Cruel Betrayal

Ruthless Desires 5

OceanofPDF.com

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To my love—

I really couldn’t’ve done this one without you.

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Author's Note

Also By Elira Firethorn

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Playlist & Storyboard

Playlist:

Worship – Ari Abdul

Breathe – Kansh

Shut Up and Listen – Nicholas Bonnin, Angelicca

Cursed – Ari Abdul

I Will Fail You – Demon Hunter

Bitter – Archers

THE DEATH OF PEACE OF MIND – Bad Omens

You’ve Created a Monster – Bohnes

Say It Right – Sunlike Brothers, Micano

We’re Screwed – Unlike Pluto

Consume – Chase Atlantic, Goon Des Garcon

The Love You Want – Sleep Token

Listen on Spotify.

Storyboard:

View on Pinterest.

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Before You Read

Cruel Betrayal is a dark, erotic romance book intended for people over the age of eighteen. Please read over this content list to make sure there's nothing inside this book that could affect you negatively. Put your mental health first please!

Emotional: panic attack, reliving childhood trauma (emotional abuse and neglect, death of a young sibling, parental abandonment) and dealing with the aftereffects, a child having suicidal thoughts in the past, misogyny, fear of water, running anxious thoughts, aversion to vulnerability, skipping meals (due to anxiety/lack of appetite), feelings of unworthiness, gaslighting (from parent), domestic violence (backstory), and infidelity (not between the MCs, in backstory).

Physical: insomnia, torture, murder, kidnapping, and a threat to a child's safety.

Sexual: degradation, bondage, spanking, pegging, spitting, domination and submission, edging, orgasm control, knife play (with cutting), and blood play.

Sorry not sorry for the cliffhanger.

As is the case with all the books in this series, you won't find many physical descriptions of the main characters (and most of the side characters) so you can imagine them however you'd like.

The scenes in this book aren't meant to be a guide to kink or BDSM. This is a work of *fiction* and should be read as such.

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Chapter One

Oliver

Note: This book contains darker themes. Please flip back and read the Before You Read section if you haven't already.

If I could start every morning like this, I would. Hands cuffed behind my back, muscles tight with anticipation, and my mind foggy with pleasure.

"Princess," I groan. "Fuck me harder, please."

Wren has me on my knees and face-down on the bed. I understand why she's being gentle—this is her first time doing this. But goddamn, I need her to give me more.

"You're sure?" she asks uneasily. Her hold on my hips tightens.

"I can take it. Fuck, Wren, I'm begging you."

She hesitates, sliding into me at the same pace she's been maintaining. I can't see her expression, but apparently, she finds the confidence she needs. She adds more force to her next thrust, and I cry out into the blankets.

Wren freezes. "Did I hurt you?"

"No. God, no. Keep going, princess. You feel amazing."

Again, she eases back into me. It takes her a second to find her rhythm, but then she's fucking my ass like she never wants to stop. "You'll tell me if I hurt you?"

"Always, princess. But you feel like heaven."

At that, she goes a little harder, and I let out a loud, long groan.

The second I realized Wren likes topping me, I bought the necessary equipment for this. I wasn't sure we'd ever get to this point, but apparently, all it took was Elliot mentioning the mere concept of pegging me. It's only been a couple days, and Wren jumped on the first opportunity she got.

It started with her cuffing my wrists and touching me everywhere except for where I needed her to. With her lips on mine, her fingers trailed over my arms, my chest, and my abs. When she went lower, she purposefully avoided my cock. I swear, I almost died.

But then she got me into this position, prepped me, and started fucking me with the light purple dildo I got for her. Well, I suppose it was just as much for me. But Wren's eyes still lit up when I showed her the dildo and harness. She may have been a little nervous at first, but she's quickly figuring it out.

"You have no idea how many times I've thought of this," I grunt out, moving to meet her thrusts.

"You have no idea how many times *I've* thought of this," she replies. One of her hands slides from my hip to my ass, squeezing. "I've wondered what it would feel like to pound into you from behind and hear you groaning my name."

God, this woman. "And how do you like it?"

"I think it's safe to say I'll be doing this a lot from now on."

"Oh, thank fuck," I pant.

“But,” she says, drawing out the word in a playfully thoughtful way. “I *do* want to try a couple other things.”

“You can do whatever you want to me. I’m yours.”

Pausing her thrusts, she leans forward and places a kiss to my shoulder. “I know.”

She fucks me just like that for a couple minutes before pulling out. I don’t want her to stop, but I’m curious what else she has up her sleeve.

For a second, Wren doesn’t move. A small sound leaves her throat, and then I feel the light touch of her finger against my skin. She traces the small scar in the shape of an “R” that’s on my right ass cheek.

“I’ve never noticed this before,” she says softly.

“Probably been too preoccupied with other things.”

Again, her finger runs over the scar. “Rhett did it?”

“Mmhmm. A couple years ago.” I smile at the memory. “I wanted to feel owned, if that makes sense.”

“It does,” she murmurs. “I feel that way too, sometimes.”

“He’d do it, you know. If you wanted him to. I think he probably hasn’t brought it up because he doesn’t want to scare you or make you feel pressured.”

She’s silent, and I wonder if I misread her. Maybe she’s not into that at all. But then she hums thoughtfully and says, “That could be nice.”

I half expect her to ask more questions, but instead, she guides me into a new position. With my hands behind my back, it’s hard to maneuver, but Wren doesn’t seem to mind helping me. She settles against the pillows and headboard, half sitting up, half lying down. Then she helps me keep my balance until I’m straddling her.

“I want you to ride me,” she says as she reaches behind me and un-clips the leather cuffs. Gently, she brings my hands in front of me and redoes them.

I think I’ve died and gone to heaven.

It takes us a second to get the dildo lined up, and then I lower myself onto it with a sound that’s somewhere between a moan and a whine. With one hand, Wren holds mine so I can have some leverage. With the other, she wraps her fingers around my dick.

Nope. Pretty sure this is better than heaven.

As I set a pace, Wren watches me with bright eyes. When I go faster, so does her hand. My brain short-circuits for a second. It feels so good—almost too good—and I have to fight to not get lost in the sensations.

“Wren,” I gasp. “Oh, *fuck.*”

She’s stroking my dick perfectly. If we keep going like this, I’m going to come before she gets the chance to, and that won’t do. I want her as satisfied as I will be. But if she doesn’t stop, I can’t last for much longer.

Thoughts of coming all over her breasts fill my head, and I groan. I may not want to come yet, but *god*, that’d be such a pretty sight. I wish I could reach down and squeeze them, or better yet, lean down and suck one of her nipples into my mouth.

That idea has me teetering too close to the edge. “Princess, I’m too close.” I stop, and thankfully, her hand slows. “Too hot. You’re too fucking hot.”

She tilts her head to the side. “You don’t want to come?”

“Not until you have. Princess, please. I need to worship you.”

“Worship me,” she whispers, almost as if it’s a question.

“May I?”

Wren trails a finger down the front of my chest, so lightly that it makes me shiver. As she watches me, a heated smile graces her features. “Yes. But only with your mouth.”

Moaning, I kiss her. “As you wish.”

She helps me get off her, and then she takes the harness off and sets it aside. I don’t mind the time it takes us to get into a new position. It just means I get to watch Wren gracefully lower herself so she’s sitting on the mattress with her legs dangling off the edge.

Once I’m standing in front of her, I bask in her lustful gaze. Her eyes rake over my naked body, lingering on my cock.

“Well,” she says with a hint of giddiness, “I’m waiting.”

I start with her face, brushing my lips across her forehead and over her cheeks. Her neck is next, and I leave behind a trail of tiny kisses before lightly nipping at her earlobe. When she moans and tilts her head back, I take it as an invitation to gently suck on one of the spots that always seems to drive her wild.

When I make it down to her breasts, I trace a circle around one of her nipples with my tongue. Only once Wren has arched her back impatiently do I suck on it. She grips the hair at the back of my neck to keep me in place, just as I hoped she would.

The position is awkward enough that I can’t hold it for long. If I could brace myself with my hands, it’d be a different story, but I don’t mind being cuffed. So I straighten and bring my lips to Wren’s. Pride bursts through me when she sighs happily into my mouth.

“On your knees, O.” Wren nods to the floor right by the bed.

By the time my knees hit the carpet, my need to come is long forgotten. All I can think about is burying my head in between her legs and feasting

until she screams.

Wren settles onto the bed right in front of me. When she spreads her legs, it pulls an unwarranted groan from me.

“So pretty,” I murmur. Even though it kills me, I take my time kissing my way up her thighs. How could I not savor every second of this? To me, Wren is a goddess, and having her is a privilege I’ll never take for granted.

When I finally reach the apex of her thighs and part her labia with my tongue, she whimpers. *God*, that sound. If I could play it on repeat continuously in my head, I would. Gently, I spread her arousal to her clit, and a new wave of need washes over me when she whimpers again.

Wren leans back on her elbows and watches me with a satisfied glint in her eyes. “Just like that, Oliver. You’re such a good boy, aren’t you?”

I reply by circling her clit with my tongue. She tenses, and one of her hands grasps the hair on the top of my head. As Wren moans, she holds my face against her and rolls her hips.

Fuck. I think the only thing that’d make this better is having Ell and Rhett watching. I’m perfectly happy to have some time with just me and Wren, though. Especially when it’s like this.

As I work on Wren, her grip on my hair gets painfully tight. It only adds to the fulfillment I get from pleasing her. And when her voice shakes while she moans my name? My dick grows harder, and it’s nearly impossible to not stroke it with my cuffed hands.

With a renewed burst of enthusiasm, I suck on her clit. A different need grows alongside the ache to find my own release. I want her to come all over my tongue while her screams fill the house.

“Oliver, *ohfuckyes*, don’t stop.”

There’s something about the way she says it that makes me lose all control. I can’t wait any longer. It’s a bit awkward with my hands restrained, but I manage to wrap one around my dick and stroke while I continue sucking on her clit.

She notices. Fuck, of course she notices.

“Don’t touch yourself,” she pants. “Only I get to do that today.”

I groan in protest, even though her saying that only serves to turn me on more. Releasing my cock, I clasp my hands together to stop myself from returning to what I was just doing.

“It’ll be worth it,” she promises with a hazy smile.

There’s no way it couldn’t be. Sex with any of the three of them always ends with me panting, sweaty, and fully satisfied.

It only takes Wren a couple minutes before she’s close. I keep my movements consistent until she throws her head back and cries out. If Elliot and Rhett aren’t awake yet, they are now. And what a perfect sound to wake up to.

“Oliver,” Wren gasps when I don’t slow down. She has to force my head away, and even then, I try to dip back down to keep going. When my tongue makes contact with her clit, she yelps. “Too—too sensitive. I need a second.”

“I need you,” I groan as I rest my head against her thigh. “Please, princess.”

“Get up.”

I waste no time, leaning into the mattress to stabilize myself. Once I’m on my feet, Wren sits up and strokes my dick teasingly.

“Is this what you need?” she croons.

“More,” I plead.

She clicks her tongue. “So greedy. Do you want to fuck me?”

“Yes.” The word comes out breathy and whiny. I have to stop myself from jutting my hips forward.

Wren hums and continues to move her hand up and down my cock at a slow, lazy pace. She’s glowing, either from her orgasm or from realizing just how much power she holds over me right now. The longer she makes me wait, the more desperate I get, and she knows it.

Finally, she leans back and props herself up on her elbows. “Start off slow.”

I position my dick at her entrance and slide in. It’s hard to follow her instructions, but I get to watch her expression as I sink all the way into her. Fuck, it’s beautiful. Her head drops back, exposing the graceful curve of her neck and pushing her breasts forward slightly.

“Goddamn, princess.” Somehow, I manage to stay slow for her, but my control is fraying at the edges.

She whimpers as I pull out and ease back in again. Her gaze is caught on my dick as it disappears inside of her. “Fuck. Harder, O. Give me all you’ve got.”

I oblige her immediately. She brings one hand down to rub her clit, which makes her clamp down around my cock. It pulls groans from both of us.

That familiar pressure builds inside of me from the first thrust. Considering the sounds coming from Wren, she’s not gonna last long either. It’s just too hot—her ordering me around and the burning need I have to obey her every command. It’s impossible not to succumb to the blissful sensations.

When Wren comes, I almost lose it right there. My only saving grace is that I’m able to slow down while she writhes on the bed. She didn’t tell me

I couldn’t come without her permission, but I want it anyway.

“Ohhh,” I groan. “Wren, it feels too good. Please—please, can I come?”

“Where do you want to?”

“I—*ahh*—” For a split second, I lose all ability to think. I didn’t realize she was going to give me the option. But the image of my cum on her breasts flits through my mind just in time. “On you, princess. Please.”

She nods. “Go ahead.”

I pull out, and immediately, she wraps her hand around my cock and strokes. Within seconds, my vision goes blank, and I almost fail to keep my balance. Ropes of cum cover her chest as I shudder through my orgasm.

“Holy shit,” I say unsteadily. “Wren, *holy shit.”*

With trembling hands, Wren undoes my handcuffs and tosses them farther onto the bed. All I can do is try to catch my breath while I stare at her cum-coated skin.

“Even prettier than I thought it’d be,” I murmur.

After sitting up, Wren yanks me down into a mind-numbing kiss. She licks into my mouth, moaning at her taste on my lips. I relax into the feeling of being completely undone by her.

“I love you,” Wren whispers when we pull away.

“I . . . goddamn, princess, I love you so much it hurts.”

She kisses me again, much more gently this time, before standing and leading me to the shower. We clean up, and my assumption is that we’re going to get dressed and head downstairs, but Wren pushes me onto the bed.

I laugh. “Are we going again already?”

“No.” She grabs the sheet and pulls it over us. “But I want to hold you for a few minutes.”

My heart melts as her arms come around me. “Do you ever wonder if you’re too perfect?”

She snorts. “God no.”

I hum contentedly. “I think you’re perfect.”

She rolls her eyes but gives me another happy kiss. We settle into a comfortable silence, and I wonder if Elliot and Rhett are up yet. I wouldn’t mind staying like this for a while, but no doubt, we have work to do.

We only got back from Florida last night, but the house has been filled with an urgent tension ever since. Worrying about Andrew and Benny’s safety has already taken a large toll on us, and that’s only the tip of the iceberg. Me and the guys are a little more used to the stress, but Wren . . . she’s going through it.

I brush some hair out of her face and let my hand linger over her soft skin. If I could get away with always having some part of her body under my hands, I would. “How are you holding up, princess?”

She smiles, although I swear I detect a hint of sadness. “All right, I guess. Worried I’m gonna get fired, and then feeling guilty for thinking about something like that right now. There are so many other things that need our attention.”

Of course. Between Wren getting kidnapped and our trip to Florida, she’s had to take a lot of unexpected days off. From what I can tell, she’s not particularly attached to the coffee shop, but it’s still her job. I’d be worried about getting fired, too. Except she doesn’t need to work if she doesn’t want to.

“Most of our money is Ell’s,” I tell her. “If you feel like you have to contribute financially, you don’t have to. None of us really do. It’s mostly

stocks and investments and complicated shit like that. And you know we'll take care of you, right?"

She chews on her lip before her gaze flicks away. "When I broke up with Adam, I made a promise to myself to never be financially dependent on a man again."

Oh. Given what a piece of shit Adam is, it makes sense. "I get that."

Her eyes return to mine. "Really?"

"Rhett was the same way when we all moved in together. He was stuck in that house with his dad for so long. After Sammy died, he had no reason to stay with Richard, so he moved in with Elliot's family. It was better, but it was rough on him, too. He still felt trapped.

"We all went to college together and lived in the same apartment. The thing that made the most sense was for us to live off Ell's trust fund so we could focus on school and finding Sammy's killer without having to worry about money.

"Elliot didn't care. He's always viewed his money as our money. It's who he is—taking care of his loved ones is in his nature. But Rhett was so used to feeling unsafe. It took him a long time to be able to fully trust us."

"He does now though, right?"

I nod. "He still struggles with opening up, but that's not due to a lack of trust. Healing takes time."

"My reasons aren't about trust, either," she tells me. "I mean, maybe they were when I made the promise to myself. But now that I'm with the three of you, that's not it. I trust you guys with my life."

I stroke her arm. If this is what I think it's about, she has no need to worry. "Letting us take care of you isn't the same as you losing yourself. You know that, right?"

“Yeah. And agreeing to it feels a lot better than what Adam and I planned together. I had to convince myself that was a good idea. But I’m safe with you three in a way I wasn’t with Adam. Financial dependence isn’t as scary.”

“But?” I ask, sensing one is coming.

She sighs. “But it’s not just about the money. It’s about who I am and what I want out of life.”

“And what do you want, princess? To be a graphic designer?” I remember her mentioning that once, although I’ve definitely seen her more excited about other things. Usually books.

“When I came up with the idea, it was because I wanted to travel. I knew I’d need a flexible job, and I have a decent artistic eye, so freelancing made sense.”

“And now?”

“I don’t know. That was the last life decision I made before I started dating Adam. And then everything shifted from there. I stopped working toward my goals, and they just fell on the back burner.”

“So graphic design was more of a means to an end than anything else.”

“I guess so. I mean, I like it. But I’m not hopelessly in love with it, either. I think I was just grasping for straws at that point.” She shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter, anyway—at least not right now. We have more important things to focus on.”

“No. This is important, too.” I squeeze her arm. “What did you want to be when you were a kid? Not the practical stuff that people said you’d be good at. What was the secret dream in the back of your head that never really went away?”

She grimaces. “My dreams were naive.”

“I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours.”

She narrows her eyes at me before nodding. “You first.”

I grin. “From the ages of eight to twelve, I was determined to be an ice cream taste tester. From there through most of high school, I wanted to be a concert pianist. Was good enough, too.”

“Really?”

“Yep. That’s how I got the scholarship to go to such a nice school. My grades were never great, though. No clue how I managed to keep it.”

“Wait. If you wanted to be a concert pianist, then what happened?”

“Anxiety.” My face falls. “Any time I had a recital or performance, I’d have panic attacks for weeks leading up to it. It made me so miserable, and I couldn’t imagine living the rest of my life like that. I’m pretty sure I’d be able to handle it now, but back then, I just couldn’t.”

Wren’s expression softens with sympathy. “Do you think you’ll start performing again once everything is done with Ludo?”

“Maybe. I’ve thought about opening my own studio and teaching kids to play. I got lucky, you know? My mom worked so hard to make sure we had a piano in the house, and getting that scholarship was a one in fifty chance.

“There are lots of kids who don’t even have consistent access to a piano. I’ve always thought it could be nice to change that. Maybe I’d be able to teach for really low prices, or even for free.”

“That could be really nice,” Wren says. “Much more helpful than ice cream taste testing.”

With a chuckle, I kiss the top of her head. “Eight-year-old me would be severely disappointed in my life choices. But enough about that. It’s your turn.” I nudge her gently.

She groans and buries her face in my chest. “I was hoping you’d forget.”

“Never. Spit it out, princess.”

When she pulls away so I can see her, she’s frowning. “I promise that books aren’t my only personality trait.”

I smile. “I know.”

“I wanted to have a book and coffee shop. I always imagined it’d have big windows and cozy reading nooks. And we’d have author signings and maybe sell bookish candles—locally made if possible. I planned on having an apartment above the shop, too, so I wouldn’t have to worry about getting to and from work.”

There’s no way.

I laugh before I can stop myself. “You’re joking, right?”

Immediately, she goes tense in my arms. “I . . . is it really that laughable?”

“Oh, fuck. No, not at all. It’s just that Elliot wanted something similar when we were in high school.”

“He did?”

“Yeah.” I grin. “You should ask him about it. Sometimes, I think he never truly gave up on the idea. His degree is in business, after all.”

Her eyes fog over in the way they do when she’s thinking really hard. “That’s . . .”

I wait, but she never finishes her sentence. My hope is that she’s opening herself up to the possibilities that are available to her, but I’m not sure. Either way, we’re different from Adam in a lot of ways. We’ll support her no matter what she decides to do.

“For what it’s worth,” I say gently, “I don’t think you’ll lose yourself.”

She frowns, and her nose crinkles in the most adorable way. “How can you be so sure?”

With an amused exhale, I kiss her forehead. “Because you’ve been fighting to make sure that doesn’t happen from day one, princess. You’ve got this. You just have to figure out what you want out of life. And you’re allowed to take your time with that.”

Finally, she relaxes, and I lean in to kiss her. Talking about the future always leaves me feeling hopeful, so I have no desire to break our happy little bubble. But then someone knocks on my door.

“Yeah?” I call out.

Elliot pops his head in. “I’m making breakfast, and then Rhett has something he needs to show us.”

Just like that, my good mood deflates. Whatever Rhett’s found, there’s no way it’s something good. “We’ll be down in a couple minutes.”

Elliot leaves, and I heave in a long, steadying breath.

“Ready to return to reality?”

Wren threads her fingers through mine. “With you, always.”

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Chapter Two

Elliot

Being overwhelmed is something I'm familiar with. In fact, it's how I managed to get through high school without exploding. Extra credit here, student government there. Free time? Fill that with another class. Another club. Another project. Another tutoring job.

If I had too much on my plate, there was no room in my head to process my parents' self-inflicted misery. Rhett and Ol became a much-needed distraction and support system in my teens. But when I was without them, I buried myself in as many *anythings* as I could.

And then Sammy died, and the three of us threw ourselves into finding her killer. We barely let ourselves come up for air. Hell, years later, we still struggle with letting ourselves rest.

Which, I suppose, is why Rhett looks like absolute shit. We got home from Florida late last night and all immediately went to bed—even him. But he got up at some point in the early morning, and it's no surprise that this is what he went straight to.

My heart is in my throat as we all gather around the desk in the library. Rhett's seated, and his leg is bouncing as he stares at his open laptop. There are so many things on my mind, so many things to do, and the look on his face only means he's about to add something else.

"Just tell us," Oliver says nervously.

"They brought Andrew to the condo after those two guys tried to get to Aubrey," Rhett says. His eyes are unfocused, and his voice is hoarse and weighed down with worry for his brother. "The bug we planted caught their conversation, and it's . . ."

Shit. Rhett's the bluntest out of the four of us. If he's struggling to say it out loud, that's not good. We're already worried enough about his brothers.

"It's what?" Wren asks.

"Just listen," Rhett says before hitting play.

"You have exactly sixty seconds to explain yourself," Ludo says through the speaker. "How do you know these men? Why were you working with them? I've been nothing but generous toward you. I took you and your brother in, gave you a place to stay, and gave you a way to gain custody. *This* is how you repay me? With betrayal? Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

Andrew's voice comes through next, unsure and terrified. "What do you mean, betrayal? I got a text from you telling me what to do! I was just following orders."

"Following orders?" Ludo bellows. "What texts? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I—here, I'll show you."

There's momentary silence, and I assume it's Andrew showing Ludo his phone. Then Andrew says, "I did everything you asked. I waited until I saw

Aubrey show up with her bodyguards, and then I texted *you.* See? It's right here. I told you they were going to the penthouse instead of the condo, so I stole a key card from an employee *like you told me to,* and then you sent your men up."

"I didn't send these texts," Ludo snaps. "Those men don't work for me, and I didn't receive that text from you. If you're lying to me—"

"I'm not," Andrew insists.

Something shatters, and I can only imagine it's from Ludo throwing something. "Don't you *dare* interrupt me," he seethes.

"I—I'm sorry, sir."

"Sit there," Ludo says curtly. "Don't move. And give me your phone. I'll have one of my men look into this and see what happened."

"Yes, sir," Andrew says quietly.

"If I find out you're lying," Ludo says, "and that you somehow faked these texts, you're done for. *Done for.* You hear me? You *and* your brother."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, and I'm not lying. I promise."

"We'll see about that," Ludo grumbles.

The conversation changes to Ludo barking out orders to his men. Rhett pauses it and shuts his laptop, so I assume that's the only important part.

The breakfast in my stomach sours. If Andrew is already on thin ice over this, one more naive mistake and . . .

Fuck. *Fuck.*

"Andrew wouldn't do something as stupid as going behind Ludo's back," Oliver croaks out, "right?"

I take a moment to think it over. "When we talked to him the other day, he seemed like he practically worshiped Ludo. Based on that, I don't think we have to worry. Hopefully the truth will come out."

Whatever the truth actually is. It sounds like someone hacked into Andrew's phone and made it look like Ludo was sending him instructions. Clever, I suppose. Except now Rhett's brothers are in even more danger.

"And if the truth doesn't come out?" Rhett's voice is so even, so . . . flat. *Emotionless.* He's staring across the library at nothing, his eyes blank. Not a good sign.

"What do you think Ludo will do?" Wren's eyes dart between the three of us. "What'll he do to Benny and Andrew?"

"He'll kill them," Rhett says quietly. "Probably torture Andrew, too. As for Benny, I'd love to say Ludo is above torturing children, but . . ." He trails off and presses his lips together.

Wren shudders.

"We need to end this now." Rhett's voice is heavy with regret. "Forget our plans. I'm not risking their lives—not like this. Even if Ludo finds out the rat isn't Andrew, the kid is bound to make a mistake that Ludo won't tolerate. We need to kill Ludo, and we need to get the boys out of there."

Rhett is met with silence. We all stare at him, too stunned, or maybe too worried, to reply. Ultimately, the decision is up to him. If he wants to abandon everything and go straight to taking out Ludo . . .

Fuck. I don't know if I can do that.

Wren looks between the three of us and squares her shoulders. "No."

"No?" the three of us ask in unison.

With all eyes on her, Wren crosses her arms. "No. You're not *forgetting your plans,* Rhett. Absolutely not. You've been working toward this for ten years. Killing him won't be enough. Not considering what he's done. You've already compromised, and now you're just going to give everything up?"

“I can’t let them get hurt.”

“No! You need this.” She gestures to me and Oliver. “All three of you need this. And I refuse to stand by and watch you make a decision you’ll regret for the rest of your life. You love Sammy too much to just let this go.”

“Sammy’s dead,” he says flatly.

“And her murderer deserves every single thing you’ve ever wanted to do to him,” Wren replies, her voice rising. “Torture him. Destroy his empire. Bring him close to death as many times as you want, and *then* end it. Ludo deserves to feel an unfathomable amount of pain, and Rhett, you deserve to be the one to inflict it.”

I’m peripherally aware of the fact that my mouth is hanging slightly ajar. Oliver is staring at Wren with so much pride in his eyes that he can’t stop grinning. But then Rhett’s voice cuts through the room, cold and sharp.

“I’m not risking my brothers’ safety.”

“Then don’t,” Wren says. “Alter the plans so we can get Benny and Andrew to safety as soon as possible, and then destroy Ludo.”

“It’s not that easy,” Rhett grits out.

“Well,” Wren says, her voice wavering ever so slightly at his tone, “you three seem to be very good at doing not-that-easy things.”

Rhett stares at her, his jaw clenched. The air is as tense as a Hayes family gathering during the holidays, and I’m not sure how to break it.

“You once told me that I underestimated how much getting revenge for Sammy meant to you,” Wren says. “Maybe I did. But—”

“You didn’t.” He looks up as he says it, his eyes softening as they meet hers.

“Then don’t underestimate your own feelings now. Not when you’re so close to achieving everything you’ve been fighting for.”

More silence.

My heart is in my throat as I watch the two of them. They’re not necessarily staring each other down, but neither of them are looking away.

I understand Rhett’s concerns. Adding Wren into our relationship while we work to take down Ludo has put her in so much danger. We’re doing our best to shield her from anyone who wants to harm her, but obviously we’re not doing a perfect job.

Having to look out for two more people adds in a lot of extra complications. Potentially getting caught was already a huge risk. Now? We won’t survive if we lose someone else. And the more *someone else’s* there are, the greater the risk. The problem is, I don’t think we can fully move on until Ludo is dead, either.

“We have to make it work.” I meet Rhett’s stare. “We have to. We’ll rework the plan as many times as we need, and for right now, we’ll prioritize the safety of the kids. But Ludo will suffer, and it’ll be at our hands.”

Rhett shakes his head. “If we get Benny and Andrew out of there, do you really think Ludo won’t put the pieces together? He’ll know it was us, or he’ll at least be suspicious. He’ll lock us out like that.” He snaps his fingers before dropping his hand into his lap. “We’ll never gain access to him again, and we could potentially have all his allies coming after us at once.”

“Then we get them out at the same time we enact our plan.”

“We don’t have a plan,” he says. “Not anymore.”

“Then we’ll make a new one.” Exasperation bleeds into my voice, but I can’t stop it. “I can’t let this go, Rhett. I can’t let *him* go. And neither can

you, whether you're able to admit it right now or not."

"I can't let it go, either," Oliver says quietly. "I can't watch *you* give up. We need to end this, yes. But we need to end it properly. You'll regret this so deeply, Rhett, and we aren't going to let that happen. Please."

"For the next couple weeks, we have a person on the inside," Wren adds. "Aubrey may even be able to give us updates on how Benny and Andrew are doing. And she has access to a lot more information on Ludo than most people. We could do something with that, right?"

"Definitely," I say. "If she can get us proof of Ludo's crimes, that right there could be enough to shut down at least half his businesses. We could potentially get the FBI and the IRS coming after him at once. Hell, probably even local authorities, too. There are a lot of variables, though. How many political connections does he have? How many more will he gain after he marries into the Stallard family?"

Oliver perks up. "But his political connections could work in our favor. While the charges start racking up against him, he'll stay out on bail, or he'll be placed under house arrest. With his money and connections, there's no way he'll end up in prison."

"Right." My mind is whirring as I start piecing things together. "We can't bring him back here if he ends up in the prison system. But we can definitely find a way to kidnap him and the boys from his home. It won't be easy, but—" I grin at Wren, "—we're *fantastic* at doing not-that-easy things."

"Bring him back here?" she asks with alarm. "Like what we did with Jordan?"

"No." Rhett leans back in his chair. His face is still grim, but at least he's stopped actively protesting. "We have a special area for Ludo downstairs."

“In the basement?”

“Not . . . yeah, I guess. Sort of.”

“We’ll show you sometime,” Oliver says right before pecking Wren on the cheek. “There are lots of things in this place you should be aware of.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Oh?”

He grins. “We even have a hidden weapons room, like in the movies.”

With a disbelieving laugh, she says, “Let me guess, you have a box hidden somewhere full of fake IDs and cash, too?”

Oliver blinks. Then he tilts his head to the side. “You actually think we don’t?”

“You do?!”

“Of course we do!” He looks at me, then Rhett. “Should we get Wren a fake ID?”

“Let’s get through the next couple of weeks first,” I say. “Right now, we need to stay focused on Aubrey, Andrew, Benny, and Ludo.”

“And we need to prioritize the kids’ safety,” Rhett says heavily. “I can’t let anything happen to them. Not again.”

“They come first.” Cautiously, Oliver rests a hand on Rhett’s shoulder. “We can figure this out. Promise.”

The rest of their conversation fades out. I’m already a million miles away, locked in my brain while I try to sort everything into a workable plan.

Get the boys to safety. Help Aubrey leave. Destroy Ludo’s life. Hurt him—kill him. Protect Wren. *Protect everyone.*

Having Aubrey on the inside couldn’t’ve come at a better time. I’m not sure how exactly we’ll use it to our advantage, just that we will.

We were originally planning for a slow and painful dismantling of Ludo’s empire. Forcing his businesses to close, having the authorities coming after

him, turning his allies against him, etc. And *then* we'd swoop in and kill him. But now everything will have to be quick. Catastrophic, even.

If there was ever a time that called for no margins of error, it's now.

When I finally come back to the present, Oliver and Wren are planning a day with Aubrey so we can talk to her without Ludo or his men overhearing. Rhett is watching me silently.

My chest aches at his expression. He looks like he could fall over from exhaustion at any moment.

"Have you transcribed it yet?" I nod to his laptop.

Rhett shakes his head.

"And how many times have you listened to it?"

Slowly, Rhett closes his eyes. Avoiding my reaction, probably. "I don't know."

The thought of Rhett alone in here, listening to that conversation on repeat for hours, is like a knife twisting straight into my heart. Yet I can't say I would've done anything differently.

Wren's phone starts ringing, and she smiles at her screen. "It's Aubrey. Perfect timing. I'll see if she's free tomorrow." She places her phone to her ear as she heads out of the library.

I watch her go until she's out of sight. Having a minute alone with Rhett and Oliver gives me a chance to propose an idea I've been tossing around for a couple days. The three of us agreed we need to make sure Wren feels secure in our relationship. Even without what happened in Florida, I'd still want her to know that when we say "us," she's included in it. Always.

I'm not sure how we'll work on it with her in the house, but I'm hoping Aubrey will rope her into some wedding stuff so it can stay a complete surprise.

After double checking to make sure Wren is still out of earshot, I turn to the guys. “Remember how we agreed to make sure Wren knows we’re as committed to her as she is to us? I know we have a lot on our plates right now, but I don’t think we should wait.”

Oliver perks up. “Do you have an idea?”

I nod. “Been thinking it over since the museum.”

Leaning forward, Rhett says, “Spill.”

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Chapter Three

Rhett

At this point, my breathing exercises are useless.

With every inhale, my lungs burn with a hatred so overwhelming I can hardly bear it. My hands began shaking the moment I finished listening to Andrew and Ludo's conversation, and they haven't stopped all day.

Not when I try to distract myself by planning with Ell.

Not when Wren makes me eat lunch.

Not when Oliver comes to me with ideas for our secret project.

There's a certain safety that comes with being home. I don't have to focus on a job or my surroundings, which gives me the mental space to process. Or, in this case, the space to let the anger inside of me swell until my chest feels like it's about to burst.

How could he do that to Mom? To us?

I'm not sure when Richard started his affair with Andrew and Benny's mother. Obviously over nineteen years ago, since that's how old Andrew is. But how long was it going on before then? Did it start before Sammy was born? Soon after? When Mom got her cancer diagnosis?

Did he leave because of me? Did I ruin his life that badly?

I shake the thought off immediately. My father's abuse may have fucked me up, but I was a child. I know it wasn't my fault. His problems with me begin and end at his problems with himself.

It should make me feel better, but instead, my rage only grows. My mother was dying. Sammy and I were terrified of losing her. We needed help. Love. Care. But Richard abandoned us.

It only got worse after Mom died. He was barely home. Sammy's blind trust and love in Richard began to wane. When he wasn't at work, I assumed he was at bars or clubs. But now I know that's not true at all.

He's the reason she's dead.

I've always blamed him a little, but I gave him more grace than I should've. I thought Richard's later neglect was due to my mom's death. I thought he was lost in grief, so deep in mourning that he wasn't capable of taking care of his children.

But that's not the case at all. He was off with his secret family, with a son he didn't hate—at least not yet. It's possible he saw my mom's death as a blessing. It was one less thing tying him to us. And then Sammy died, and the way he acted . . . He wanted to erase her. Erase every last shred of evidence that she ever existed.

Almost like he was relieved she was dead.

That idea has been hovering at the edge of my consciousness for days now. Richard may not have orchestrated Sammy's death, but he didn't do anything to protect her, either. And now that I know the truth of what he was doing, any sympathy I still harbored for him is gone.

I try to stay present throughout the day, but there's not much I can do to stop myself from thinking about my father. Even while we discuss different

ways to get the boys to safety, all I can think about is how this is *his* fault. If he'd been a better father—a better person—everything would be so different.

By the time midnight rolls around and I'm the only one awake, I have so much energy buzzing through my veins that I'm not sure I'll ever sleep again. I try everything to calm my mind—a hot shower, meditating, even Oliver's stress relief tea.

Nothing eases the hatred that threatens to burn through me until all that's left is ashes. And not a single thing soothes the anger that grips my heart so tightly I'm afraid it'll give out.

I try to avoid the inevitable, but I can only hold out for so long. How can I when destroying Ludo is everything I need but exactly what I can't have yet?

Rhett: Who do you need brought in?

Finn: I don't think that's info I should send to you.

Rhett: Give me someone, dammit.

Finn: I'd prefer to stay on Elliot's and Oliver's good sides, thank you very much.

Rhett: I'm wringing someone's neck tonight. Would you like it to be yours?

Finn: Jesus. What the hell happened?

Rhett: Just give me someone.

I pace my bedroom impatiently while I wait for him to respond. I'm about to call when my phone finally buzzes.

Finn: I'm only working one lead. Been holding him at one of the safe houses for the past week. Can't break him.

Rhett: I can help with that.

Finn: I have a feeling you want to do more than break him.

Rhett: That a problem?

Finn: Not at all.

Rhett: Send me the address.

Shoving my phone in my pocket, I get ready to go. I'll leave a note on the kitchen counter just in case someone wakes up. Elliot will be mad that I'm going by myself, but I have to. I can't hold all this inside anymore.

I creep downstairs quietly so I don't wake anyone. As I pass by the living room, I realize the glow coming from inside is too bright to be from the dying fire. My first thought is that someone accidentally left a lamp on, but when I step into the room, I freeze.

Wren and Elliot are still in here on the couch. He's fast asleep with his head in her lap, and the image tugs at something deep inside of me. It's a relief, seeing him fully relaxed, even if it's only because he's sleeping.

Wren lifts her gaze from the book in her hand. "Hi," she whispers with a smile.

"I didn't expect you to be up."

She nods to Elliot. "He hit a dead end with work. I thought it would be nice if we read together, but he fell asleep before he even finished a single page. And then . . . I didn't want to disturb him. He looks so peaceful."

Fuck. What did we do to deserve her?

"You need to get to bed, sweetheart."

"I'm not horribly tired." Wren's smile fades when she realizes I'm fully dressed, boots and all. Her free hand, which was softly stroking Ell's hair, slows to a stop. "Are you going somewhere?"

"I . . ." My stomach twists with guilt.

Was I really about to head out, in the middle of the night, without telling anyone? What if someone woke up and found me gone? Or worse, something happened? It's not like meeting up at one of Finn's safe houses is dangerous, but there's always a chance he's being watched.

You're supposed to be doing better than this, Rhett. You need to be here for them.

"No. I'm not going anywhere." Stepping up to her, I take the book from Wren's hands and set it on the coffee table. "Let's get Ell to bed, okay?"

Gently, Wren shakes him. It takes a few tries, but he reluctantly opens his eyes after a minute. He groans and rubs his face before groggily sitting up.

"What time is it?" he asks.

"A little before one," I reply. "You guys need to get some sleep."

"I'm not tired," Wren insists.

After blinking a few times, Elliot squints at me. "You need to sleep too. But why . . . why are you dressed? And wearing shoes?"

Dammit. I didn't think this through.

"I'm not leaving."

He gives me his classic *don't-fucking-lie-to-me* look before leaning back into the cushions.

With a sigh, I say, "I *was* going to head out and help Finn with something. But I decided to stay."

Ell tries to shake his head to wake himself up. "Is something wrong? Is he in danger?"

"No, I just needed to . . . blow off some steam."

It takes longer than normal for Elliot to get what I'm implying. His gaze turns sharp. "You were going alone?"

"Just to meet him at a safe house. He can't break the guy."

“And you need to blow off some steam,” he mumbles.

“Break the guy?” Wren asks. “Like . . . torture?”

We nod.

“You think it’ll help you?” Elliot asks tiredly.

It shouldn’t, but it will. “Yeah.”

“Then go. Just be careful.”

“Ell . . .”

“*Go*, Rhett. Do what you need to do. I don’t want it eating at you.” He stands. “Text me when you get there. I’ll probably be asleep, but in case I’m not, I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course.” I tug on his arm until he steps into my embrace.

He groans into my shoulder, still half asleep, before wrapping his arms around my waist. “And make sure you come home to me.”

“Always,” I murmur in his ear.

After a kiss, Elliot heads upstairs. Wren follows me through the house to the door that leads to the garage. I’m about to tell her goodnight when I realize she’s slipping on her coat and shoving her feet into her boots.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Wren, this isn’t going to be a fun trip.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing I’m not expecting it to be fun.” She straightens and gives me a determined look. “Ready when you are.”

I stare at her in silence while trying to figure out what I need to say to convince her to stay home. Ultimately, I come up short, because telling her that I’m worried she’ll be afraid of me after this feels too cowardly.

“What?” she asks when I don’t move.

“There’ll . . .” I clear my throat. “You understand that I’m going to be torturing some guy, right? And probably killing him?”

She gulps, but she nods. “Yeah. I got that.”

“And you want to watch me.”

“No. But the future has the potential to get pretty messy from here on out. Messy and violent. Right?”

“Right,” I say slowly, unsure where she’s going with this.

“I . . .” Her gaze drops, and she rubs at the back of her neck. “I’d like to not get traumatized again.”

Ah. “You’re hoping that if you’re exposed to some level of violence in a controlled environment, it’ll make it less horrifying when you encounter it in real life?”

Of course she’d think that. She’s been through hell in the past month, so it only makes sense that she’s trying to protect herself.

“During the Williams job, I was so scared, Rhett. And seeing Tyler’s body was so jarring. You remember—I puked my guts out. I’ve never had a visceral reaction like that before. Sometimes the image of him lying in the snow all bloody just pops into my mind randomly. It’s . . . it’s *horrible.”*

Again, that feeling of helplessness settles over me. When we agreed to a relationship with Wren, we knew what we’d be subjecting her to.

The idea that we could hide our lives from her was delusional, and I think on some level we all knew that. And now she has to deal with the consequences of our fuck-up. All because we couldn’t stay away until we finished our business.

How could we do this to her?

“You understand this could backfire tremendously, right?”

“I’m willing to accept those consequences.”

“As long as you’re sure.” I search her face. She looks nervous, but she also looks determined. Why I expected anything else is beyond me. Our girl is stronger than she gives herself credit for.

She nods and rolls back her shoulders. “Let’s go.”

I could tell her no. I *want* to tell her no. But how can I? Whether I think she’s ready for this or not doesn’t matter. It’s her choice.

But what if she hates you after she sees you do this?

I don’t have an answer to that question. I just know that if our roles were switched, I’d be doing exactly what Wren is.

Opening the door, I usher Wren into the garage. A raw ache claws its way up my throat as I climb into my truck with Wren beside me. I need her to understand why I’m doing this. If she doesn’t, she’ll never look at me the same way again.

Before I start driving, I text Finn again. We’re going to be later than I originally anticipated.

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Chapter Four

Wren

Rhett’s hands aren’t shaking.

Is it because he’s gripping the steering wheel so tightly that they *can’t* shake? Maybe.

His jaw is set, and his posture is perfect, like he’s a child being inspected by a judgmental, nitpicky aunt. When I reach across the console and place my hand on his thigh, he winces. I immediately pull away.

“I’m sorry,” he says quietly. Somehow, he grasps the steering wheel even tighter. “It’s not you.”

I figured as much, but the clarification still helps me breathe easier. As he makes a left turn, I sneak a better glance at him. He may not be able to sleep, but he looks so worn down. My first instinct is to give him some type of comfort, but I don’t know what to do since he can’t handle being touched right now.

We end up driving in silence for a half hour before Rhett pulls onto a road that looks like it leads into a private neighborhood. He stops at a gate and has to type in a PIN before we’re able to get inside.

“Finn’s safe house is in a gated community?” I ask as the gate automatically closes behind us. A few large houses come into view along with their pristine lawns and gardens.

Rhett throws me a surprised glance. “Thought you passed out.”

“Not even close.”

Long car rides tend to put me to sleep, sure. But stress makes me panicky whenever I get tired enough to stop thinking logically. Panic means no sleep. Eventually, my body gives in, but then the nightmares hit. It’s a miserable, endless cycle that I’ve never figured out how to break.

“We’ll get to Finn’s eventually,” Rhett says as he weaves through the quiet streets. “First, I need to show you something. And . . . do some explaining.”

Eventually, Rhett pulls over and slows to a stop. In a fluid motion, he puts the truck in park and turns off the headlights. I’m not sure where we are or why we’re here, but I get the feeling it means a lot to Rhett.

“Richard built a whole separate life and kept it from us.” His voice is hoarse, and I can tell he’s trying to hide it, but some resentment bleeds through. “After Sammy died and I moved in with Elliot’s family, I never looked back. Never looked him up to see how he was doing. If I didn’t know, then I could assume he was miserable. I was dealing with enough anger. So on the off chance that he’d moved on, I didn’t want to know.”

A concerned sound escapes my throat, but other than that, I stay silent. I don’t want to distract him.

“I don’t want to see him again,” Rhett continues. “I don’t want those old feelings to come back. It’s already difficult enough to deal with the memories. But now . . . having two brothers changes everything.

“When we found out about Andrew and Benny, it was like something inside me snapped. All of a sudden, the dread I’ve felt whenever I thought of facing my father again . . . it disappeared. I need the boys to be safe from Ludo, but I need them safe from Richard as well. Once this is all done, we have to find a way to keep Benny from him, legally or otherwise. I can’t let the abuse continue.”

This whole time, Rhett has been staring straight ahead. Now he nods to the house across the street. It may be dark, but the street lamps illuminate enough. It’s huge.

“That’s his house?” I ask.

“His and Corinne’s. That’s his new wife.” At that, he lets out a harsh breath and shakes his head. “*New wife*. They’ve been together since before Andrew was born. That’s twenty years—and who knows how long they were having an affair before she got pregnant. Fucking bastard.”

“Wait.” I sit up in my seat. “Why are we here?”

Rhett’s smile is almost regretful. “We’re not here to kill him. I just wanted to see what he’s built. And I need you to still trust me after tonight.”

A wave of unease passes through me. “What do you mean?”

“I need you to understand why I’m doing what I’m doing tonight. And I need you to know what I’ll never do, no matter how angry I get.”

“W . . . what?”

“It’ll make sense soon. Just let me explain.”

I watch him silently as he braces himself. My heart is in my throat as he starts talking.

“I was an accident. My dad was in medical school when my mom found out she was pregnant. Long story short, Richard had to drop out of school to support us. He ended up with no degree and a pile of student loans.

“Obviously, I don’t remember my infancy, but my mom told me it was hard. My dad was working multiple jobs, and she was trying to help out, but someone had to watch me.

“I think that’s where Richard’s problems with me began. He didn’t want a kid. And not only did he get one, but he had to sacrifice his career for me. Over the years, his resentment grew into hatred.” Here, Rhett pauses. He’s breathing heavily, and his hands are clenched in his lap.

“Rhett . . .”

“I’m okay.” He rubs his face. “You need to know all of this.”

It takes him a while to find his composure again. I’m about to suggest we put some distance between us and his dad’s house when he finds the strength to keep going.

“From what I remember, it started out with him having unreasonably high expectations of me. Whenever I didn’t meet those expectations, he treated it like a moral failing on my part. He used to tell me there was no good in me. I was seven the first time he said it. Fucking seven.”

My blood runs cold. *Seven years old.* Such a vulnerable, tender age. And to be told that there’s no good in you? There’s no knowing how much damage that could cause.

“Kids aren’t supposed to think about killing themselves,” Rhett continues quietly. “But I did. Every fucking day. Wondered what it would be like to get hit by a car and die. And then wondered if I could time it right, you know? Throwing myself in front of one before the driver would have enough time to slow down or swerve.”

My chest aches as I blink back tears. This isn’t the time to cry. I have no desire to derail Rhett from opening up about his childhood.

“Richard was horrible to me. But . . . somehow, through all of that, I think he still loved me. It was a selfish type of love, so maybe it’s not really love at all. Maybe it’s closer to a sense of entitlement.”

“Entitlement?”

“He still expected me to love him. Still expected me to care about what he thought. And I did, dammit. I cared for so much longer than I should’ve.”

“You were a kid,” I murmur, unsure of what else to say. It doesn’t matter because he’s not done.

“Any time I did something wrong, he’d . . .” Rhett’s eyes slide closed. His voice is weighed down with a misplaced shame that sends a tangible pain shooting through me. “He’d make me get on my knees and beg him for forgiveness. I’ve never been able to shake the way it made me feel,” he says. “Having him tower over me like that made me feel so small. So *pathetic.*

“Maybe he was trying to feel some type of power when life had royally fucked him over. I don’t know. But he never let anything slide, even if it meant I had to beg for his forgiveness every day. Once he finally gave it to me, he always expected me to hug him and tell him I loved him. If I tried to avoid it, he’d force me into it.

“To this day, I still don’t understand why. The best that I can think of is that deep down, he knew how shitty he was being. But if I did those things, if I showed him affection and love like that, then he could justify it in his head. How could he be abusive if his kid still loved him, you know?”

There’s a moment of silence, and Rhett sniffles. All I want to do is hold him and tell him that Richard was wrong. That nothing could ever justify his actions. But the last thing I want to do is hurt Rhett more.

“Did your mom know?” I ask.

“She was only peripherally aware of what Richard did to me. He hid a lot from her, although he was horrible to her, too. But a lot of times, he’d do things out of earshot or while she was working or running errands.

“She tried to combat the damage he inflicted, but she didn’t know how deeply it all ran. Or maybe she did, I don’t know. I remember coming home from school one day to her crying at the kitchen table. It looked like she’d added up the income she made from her part-time job. I remember she got a better job after that, but it barely paid more. I think she was trying to leave. She just . . . couldn’t.”

I stare at him in shocked silence. I wasn’t sure what happened in Rhett’s childhood, but this . . . my god. Everything makes so much more sense now. His aversions to touch and vulnerability, his struggles with saying he loves us, his avoidance to kneeling for anyone. I think he’s only done that a handful of times since I’ve known him.

“At some point,” Rhett says, “my dad went back and finished medical school. He married Corinne, built this damned house, and had Benny. It’s like we never existed, Wren. He’s completely forgotten about Mom and Sam. And me . . . I may still be alive, but I’m a symbol of his past failures. I’m the thing that ruined his life.

“I just have so many questions, you know? He didn’t want kids. So was Andrew an accident? Or maybe I’m wrong, and he just didn’t want *us*. But if that’s true, why does it sound like he’s been treating the boys the same way he treated me? Why has he achieved the life he wanted—” Rhett gestures to the house, “—but he’s still an asshole? How could he abandon us when we needed him the most? And how the hell am I supposed to get answers when I can’t face him again?”

Can't. My mind snags on that word. Rhett is strong. Powerful. More than that, he's determined to get revenge on Ludo. But the way I see it, Richard's neglect also played a part in Sammy's death, so I don't understand why Rhett doesn't want to kill him as well as Ludo.

Unless . . .

No. There's no way Rhett could be afraid of him.

"I'm so angry, Wren," he says, and his voice is so heavy. "There's not a moment that I'm not consumed with it. The hate." For the first time since we got into the truck, he turns his head and looks at me. "And what I'm about to do . . . it might change the way you look at me. But I need you to know that you never have to be afraid of me."

"Rhett, I could never—"

"No. You don't know that. You don't . . ." He releases a short, frustrated breath. "Richard was never physically abusive, but he still got violent. He'd throw things or punch a wall or kick at the furniture. None of us ever got hit, but I'll never forget the look of absolute terror in my mom's eyes whenever he pulled that shit. And the first time he did it in front of Sammy, she burst into tears and ran outside."

Dread pools in my stomach. I know the feeling he's talking about.

"I don't lash out randomly," Rhett says, his eyes still locked with mine. "I've never hurt Ell. I've never hurt Oliver. And I will never, *ever* hurt you, Wren."

"I know that," I whisper.

"You know that now." After a moment of hesitation, he reaches out to cup my cheek. And his eyes—it's like he's looking into my mind, and he can see every curious, cautious thought. "But you've never seen me unleash all my anger. You've never seen me take it out on something. Or someone."

“I suppose that’s true,” I say. “But that’s what I’m ultimately helping you do, isn’t it? You’re not killing Ludo because he’s a horrible person. You’re killing him for revenge. He took Sammy away from you, and you’re angry. More than angry.”

His thumb brushes over my cheek before he retracts his hand. “Yes. But you’ve never seen me do it, Wren. I’m not gonna punch this guy a few times and then go home. By the time I’m done, you won’t be able to recognize him. It’ll be brutal, sweetheart.”

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I’m aware that I probably shouldn’t be attracted to someone who has to turn to murder to manage his anger. But can I really blame him after all he’s been through?

As the reality of the situation settles on my shoulders, I swallow hard. “Just tell me he deserves it.”

“He does. I wouldn’t torture an innocent person.” He searches my face, probably looking for any trace of hesitation. “I can’t tell you exactly what he did. It’s Finn’s business, and he’ll explain it all to you when he’s ready. But he’s not a good person.”

“Then I’m sure I can handle it.” I’m not, but I have to try. “If it gets to be too much, I can step away.”

He nods. “And you . . . you understand? That I know how to control my anger? That I’ll never take it out on you?”

“I understand.”

There’s a beat of silence before he tears his eyes from mine. He puts the truck into drive. “Then we’d better get going.”

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Chapter Five

Rhett

Finn’s gaze swivels between me and Wren. When it comes to rest on me, it turns into a full-on glare. “Desensitizing your girlfriend to violence. Please tell me you feel at least a little guilty.”

“Of course I do,” I grit out. I figured he’d react like this when I explained why Wren was with me, but I was hoping he’d let it slide.

“It was my idea,” Wren says with a hint of annoyance.

Chuckling dryly, Finn tells her, “You’ve got guts, you know that? No wonder they like you.”

I bristle. We’re far past *like* and into much deeper territory.

When Finn notices my reaction, he smirks. *Fucking bastard.* No doubt, he said that on purpose to see what I’d do. Everything this man does is intentional.

“Let’s get this over with,” I say, my tone clipped. “We’re not here to chat.”

Finn leads us through the old farmhouse. It sits pretty far back from the road, and the property is maintained just enough that it doesn’t look

abandoned. Not that many people see it, other than a couple neighbors. My father's house was mostly on the way, and it still took us forty-five minutes to get here.

I'm surprised Wren didn't fall asleep during the drive. Part of me is worried that all the stress is giving her insomnia, which doesn't help with the guilt I'm already drowning in. Between this, her loss of appetite, and her increasing nightmares, I'm ready to march over to Ludo's mansion and set it on fire tonight.

You can't, I have to remind myself. *Not with Aubrey and the boys in there somewhere.*

"It took me forever to find him," Finn is saying as he leads us down into an unfinished basement. "He hasn't been in contact with anyone, at least not in person."

"But you think he knows?"

"I think I can't pass up the opportunity. He's the only one I've found in months."

Wren is looking between us questioningly, but she already knows she's not getting answers from me. If Finn isn't going to tell her what he's looking for, then I can't, either. It's not my place.

In the basement, Finn yanks on a chain that turns on a single lightbulb. It does little to illuminate the space, but it casts some light over a figure who's hunched over and tied to a chair. He doesn't look as beat up as I thought he would, which makes me wonder how Finn has been trying to break him.

The scene reminds me of something, but it takes me a second to place it. The cold, damp basement, this guy tied to a chair, the lone lightbulb—it's similar to the cellar Jordan almost killed Wren in.

“Sweetheart.” I turn my back on the man and Finn to look at her. “Are you okay?”

Wren’s shoulders are higher than normal, and she’s standing with her feet close together. It’s like she’s trying to make herself as small as possible, but her voice is strong as she says, “I’m fine.”

I want to tell her that she can wait upstairs if she’d prefer, but she knows that. She’s down here for a reason, and while I may hate it, it’s possible that it’ll be good for her.

Dammit. What kind of life am I living that her watching me torture a man could possibly be good *for her?*

“Austin,” Finn says, “meet Rhett.”

“Who the fuck is he?” Austin asks as he struggles against the ropes binding him to the chair.

“The one who’s going to force every drop of information out of you.” Finn shrugs. “Or kill you if you refuse to give in. Whichever he wants, I guess.”

“You know I won’t talk.”

With a nonchalant sigh, Finn replies, “Death it is, then.”

“Fucking traitor,” Austin grits out.

Traitor. That’s the last thing Finn is. If anything, the organization Austin works for—the one Finn clawed his way out of—betrayed *him.*

I throw Finn a questioning glance. When he nods, I grab a baseball bat that’s leaning against a table. Austin swallows audibly but keeps his mouth shut.

“Just be careful of his head,” Finn tells me. “We still need him lucid enough to talk.”

“I know that,” I say, my voice coming out more annoyed than I mean for it to.

Finn raises his hands. “Just making sure.”

He’s right to do so, but I won’t tell him that. My expertise is in killing, not extracting information.

I avoid his head entirely, going for his shins instead. The blow isn’t hard enough to break anything, but Austin still grits his teeth and squeezes his eyes shut.

“Where’s the new headquarters?” Finn asks.

Austin doesn’t respond, so I swing the bat at him again. He yells as I hit the same spot harder this time, but I can’t find it in me to care.

“Spit it out,” Finn says.

“Do whatever you want to me,” Austin snaps. “I’m not telling you shit.”

His shin is sore enough, so all I have to do is tap the bat against the same spot. I keep doing it, setting a rhythmic pace that has him flinching every time.

With a shake of his head, Finn crouches down. The look he gives Austin is one of pity and sadness, which is unexpected. “They’ve really got you that wrapped around their finger?”

“I’m loyal. You used to be,” Austin replies. “Remember? Or have you already forgotten what it’s like to be loyal to a cause? To have your life mean something?”

“Maybe I found a better cause.” Finn’s tone is detached, almost uninterested. But I know better than to believe it, even for a split second.

“Bullshit.” Austin shakes his head, and his eyes flare with hatred. “You gave up. The two of you were gonna run, weren’t you? Like fucking cowards. Everything was so hush hush, but people talk.”

He’s pissing me off, so I add more force to my taps. Austin grunts, and his voice wavers as he continues.

“I have my theories, and so does everyone else. She got to you. Poisoned you. And it worked. You let her in, and she ruined you. They should’ve executed you, too. They should’ve—”

“Stop.” At that, Finn stands. His detached demeanor is gone, but his rage is still well-contained. After glaring at Austin for another second, he turns to me. “I need some air. Do whatever you want, just keep him conscious.”

I watch him go without another word. He brushes past Wren, whose eyes are glued to me.

“You still okay?” I ask her after Finn slams the door at the top of the stairs.

She nods, and something in her expression draws me to her. I don’t realize I’m right in front of her until she has to tilt her face up to look at me.

“I don’t want to scare you,” I say quietly.

“You won’t.”

Even though I’ve already explained myself to her, I can’t stop myself from doing it again. Seeing Wren’s eyes wide with the same fear my mother felt toward my father would break me.

Dipping my head down, I rest my forehead against hers. “No matter what, I need you to remember that you’re safe with me. I’ll hurt people. I’ll draw out their pain before killing them. Hell, I’ve even done it on your behalf, and it won’t be the last time I do. But you—you will *never* be at risk of me doing something like this to you. Please . . . just *please.* I need you to know that.”

“I do.” Her voice is strong as she angles her face to the side and kisses me. “I know, Rhett. This is different. You told me he deserves it, right?”

“Right.”

Somehow, she smiles. And somehow, it partially eases the ache in my chest. “I trust you.”

I let myself stay in her embrace for a few more seconds before breaking away. This is already taking longer than I meant it to.

Wren hovers a decent distance behind me as I advance toward Austin. For the few brief seconds I was focused on her, my anger faded to a bearable point. But now it slams into me again. All the pain. The secrets, the abuse, the lies. They all dig into me like barbed wire.

Ludo can’t pay tonight. Richard may never pay. But today, at least for a few hours, I can pretend. Austin can have a different face in my mind. Maybe then, once I’ve let some of this fury and hurt bleed out of me, I’ll be able to find momentary peace.

Austin doesn’t try to inch away. He just braces himself and squeezes his eyes shut. The bat connects with his ribcage, and a sickening crack fills the air as he doubles over.

“Fuck,” he wheezes.

I don’t give him even a second to recover. Throwing the bat to the floor, I kick him in the stomach. It’s with enough force that it knocks him over, and his head hits the floor with a thud.

Dammit.

I yank the chair back up. Austin’s face is twisted with pain, but his eyes are still open, which is all I care about.

“I’m not giving in,” he says in between shallow breaths.

“That doesn’t change the fact that you’re not making it out of here alive.”

“Fuck you,” he seethes.

“I suppose I could take it easier on you if you give Finn what he wants, though. The location of the new headquarters?”

He’s silent.

“The name of one of your superiors?”

Nothing.

“How about your last assignment?”

He rolls his eyes.

“Fine.” I pick up the bat again. “Have it your way.”

I do as Finn requested and keep Austin conscious. After a while, I move from blows to one of the knives Finn has laid out on the nearby table. Of course, I have to be careful he doesn’t bleed out, but I know where I can and can’t cut.

The whole time, Wren stays silent behind me. Every couple minutes or so, I glance toward her to make sure she’s not frozen in fear. She’s not moving much, but she doesn’t look scared.

“He’s killed people,” Austin throws out at some point. “Good people. Innocents.”

It takes me a second to realize he’s talking about Finn. “And?”

“He did it with little to no remorse. You really want to be friends with a person like that? Him and I are a lot alike, you know.” He nods to Wren. “You told her I deserve this. If that’s true, then so does Finn. We worked the same assignments. We killed the same types of people and ruined the lives of others who hadn’t done anything wrong.”

I laugh. If this guy thinks he can put even a crack in the foundation of loyalty I have to Finn, he’s delusional.

When Austin realizes his manipulation tactic didn’t work, the light in his eyes vanishes. Maybe I’d take pity on him if he was actually like Finn, but I

know he’s not.

Placing the tip of my knife under Austin’s chin, I force his head up so he’s looking at me. More blood runs onto the blade from where I broke skin. “You have no idea who Finn’s become. He doesn’t answer to them anymore, and he hasn’t for years. You want to prove you’re like him? Then give it up. Tell us something—anything.”

“It doesn’t change what he’s done.”

“Give it up, Austin,” Finn says from the top of the stairs. The door shuts, and his footsteps sound heavily as he makes his way down. “You’re not going to win him over.”

“You should be ashamed of yourself,” Austin bites out when Finn comes into view. His eyes flash as he adds, “All three of you.”

In the corner of my eye, Wren winces.

That’s it.

One second, the knife is in my hand. The next, the blade is fully embedded in his thigh. Austin screams in agony.

Leaving the knife in, I lean forward until my face is only an inch away from his. “Say whatever you want to me and Finn. But no one talks to her that way. *No one.*”

Tears are streaming down Austin’s face as he gasps for air. Slowly, I twist the knife. His face contorts as he cries out.

“Did you get anything?” Finn asks as he moves closer, his tone almost apathetic.

“Nothing.”

Finn sighs. “I had high hopes for you, Austin. I really thought you’d be one of the first to leave after I did.”

“Looks like you’re wrong on multiple fronts, then.”

With a disappointed grimace, Finn turns to me. “He’s not gonna talk. Do whatever you want to him.”

Something worse than hatred drips from Austin’s voice as he says, “Blame me for doing the right thing, I don’t care. At least I didn’t lead her to her death. She deserved better than you.”

Finn’s expression is blank, his voice hollow. “I know.” With his hands shoved deep into his pockets, he retreats until he’s next to Wren. “Your move, Rhett.”

My memory is fuzzy from there on out. In my mind, Austin isn’t Austin anymore. Half the time, he’s Ludo. The other half, he’s my father. His screams bring me a sick kind of satisfaction, and every time I make him bleed, some of my resentment and hate bleeds out, too.

I wish it was them—Ludo and Richard. One day, hopefully soon, it will be.

I don’t stop until I notice that blood isn’t dripping onto the ground anymore. It’s only then, looking down at the cold, lifeless heap on the floor, that I realize my hands have finally stopped shaking.

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Chapter Six

Elliot

In the morning, I wake up alone. I have a vague memory of Rhett and Wren waking me up in the living room last night. When I made it to my room, I found Oliver sound asleep in my bed, waiting for me. The second I crawled under the covers, he cuddled up to me, and I kept him in my arms for most of the night.

Disappointment winds through my chest as I sit up. Oliver normally wakes before I do, and it's already later than I typically sleep, so it makes sense that he's gone. But I wish he was still here.

Groggily, I force myself out of bed and into the bathroom. As I brush my teeth, the rest of last night plays through my head.

Did Wren and Rhett make it back home okay?

Toothbrush still in my mouth, I rush back into my bedroom and grab my phone. Two text messages await me.

Rhett: Made it to Finn's just fine.

Rhett: Home safe. Gonna try to get some sleep.

Relief floods my system, and I drop my phone on the bed.

After I finish getting ready for the day, I head downstairs. As I do, I can just make out a soothing melody coming from the living room. Oliver must be playing the piano.

Before I join him, I pop into the kitchen. The coffee pot is full, so I fill two mugs and add cream and sugar to Oliver's. When I enter the living room, his eyes are immediately drawn to me.

A full smile forms on his face. "Hey, handsome."

"Morning. Coffee?"

"Please." He wraps his fingers around his mug, but before he takes a sip, he tilts his face up to me.

I kiss him for far longer than I need to. When I pull away, Oliver's lids are heavy, and he breathes in a deep, happy sigh.

"You were gone when I woke up." A little of my earlier disappointment seeps into my voice.

"You were gone when I fell asleep," he counters. "I tried to wait for you this morning, but I got restless."

"Did you sleep okay otherwise?" I slide onto the piano bench next to him, and he gladly makes room.

"Yeah. You?"

"Fine. I fell asleep on the couch in the living room last night. Woke up before Rhett and Wren left."

Oliver frowns. "Left?"

"Rhett needed to let out some of his anger, and Wren went with him. They were only at Finn's."

"Why didn't you wake me up and tell me?"

"You wouldn't've been able to get back to sleep, Ol. You know that."

"Yeah, but—"

I shut him up with another kiss, which he doesn't seem to mind too much. "They're home safe now," I tell him, my lips lingering on his. "You've got nothing to worry about."

With a groan, he drops his forehead to my shoulder. "I wish."

I snake an arm around his waist. Careful not to jostle him enough that he spills his coffee, I tug him until he's as close to me as he can get. "Do you need to talk?"

"I'm good." He gulps down his coffee before setting the mug on a coaster that lives on the piano.

"There's no way—"

"I'm as fine as I can be. I'm taking my meds, we're making progress, and at least for now, all four of us are home and safe."

I frown. "You're really okay?"

He laughs, but the sound is hollow. "No. None of us are okay. But I'm trying to focus on the good today, and I'm also not going to dump my shit on you when you're already stressed enough."

"But—"

"Mm mm, no. You're always taking care of us, Ell. It's too much weight for you to carry."

But someone has to.

"I just want to see you happy," I tell him.

"Then give yourself a break. Hell, let one of us take care of you for a change."

"I do," I say indignantly.

"Not nearly enough." Oliver turns himself so he's sitting cross-legged on the bench and facing me. "Something's gotta give. Both you and Rhett have

been burning the candle at both ends, and before you know it, there's not going to be anything left."

"I just can't relax. Yesterday, I tried, but how can I focus on anything but work? I have to. I can't let anything happen to the boys, or to any of you. There's so much to do, so much to—"

The rest of my sentence dies as Oliver fits his mouth to mine. I make a startled noise as both his hands hold my head so I can't pull away. He tastes like coffee and sugar, like happiness and home.

"That's much better," he murmurs when he releases me. It takes the words a couple seconds to register, and by then, one of his hands is already drifting down my body.

"What're you doing?" I ask once my brain starts working again.

"Helping you relax," he says in between the hungry kisses he's leaving all over my neck. "And then I'm gonna make you breakfast while I tell you all about the ideas I have for our secret project, and you're gonna give me your opinions."

When he nudges my chin up, I let my head fall back. Oliver sucks on my neck hard enough to bruise, but I don't mind. The thought actually sends a new wave of desire through me, and I relax into it.

My dick hardens under his hand, which has made its way down my chest and stomach. All I manage is a groan.

"Just focus on how it feels," he says against my skin. "Let me handle the rest."

When I nod, he slips his hand into my sweatpants and past my briefs. In seconds, I'm fully erect, and he wraps his fingers around the hard length. He loves doing this—placing all his attention on one person and not letting them concentrate on anything except what he's doing.

As Oliver strokes my dick, his lips find mine again. They're soft and a bit swollen, and I never want him to pull away.

"Fuck. Turn for me." Oliver slides off the bench and onto the floor. His knees hit the carpet as I swivel in place so I'm facing him, and he wastes no time yanking my clothes off. "God, yes."

He licks my cock from base to tip before taking it into his mouth. My eyes close of their own accord. There's something about the way Oliver sucks dick that has me choking on air every time.

"Ol," I moan. I lean back, and my elbows hit a bunch of piano keys as I brace myself. The discordant notes sound throughout the room, making Oliver chuckle around my cock. "*Fuck.*"

He does something with his tongue that forces a grunt from my throat. As his head moves up and down, his hand follows. Opening my eyes, I watch him. He's moaning and taking as much of my cock as he can, just like he always does. Sometimes I think he enjoys this as much as I do.

After a minute, he raises his head and licks his lips. He's still stroking me with his hand as he meets my gaze and grins. "I thought about waking you up like this, but I figured I should let you sleep."

I groan at the thought. It wouldn't've been the first time he's done that, but he usually gets my permission the night before.

"Maybe tomorrow," he muses before sucking on the tip of my cock. He works his tongue as well, and it pulls a soft moan from my lips.

For once, I do as I'm told. Relaxing into the piano, I close my eyes again and keep my focus on Oliver. It's not like it's hard. With the way he's moving up and down my dick, he's the only thing I *want* to concentrate on.

It helps that Oliver is so enthusiastic that it's almost comical. One of his hands is moving in time with his mouth, and the other is gripping my hip. If

I tried to pull him off me, he'd probably protest until I relented.

"Can't get enough of my dick, can you?" I ask.

He doesn't bother replying, except to move his hand from my hip to cup my balls. I groan as he switches to focusing on the head of my cock, sucking and using his tongue. By the time I'm close, my worries are at least temporarily forgotten. I gasp Oliver's name, and he raises his head, still stroking me with his hand.

"Where'd you like to come?" he asks with a self-satisfied smile.

"Your mouth," I pant. "Oh, Ol, *fuck—*"

His lips wrap around the crown of my dick just as I start to come. My whole body tenses as the sensations overwhelm me. Oliver's moans only add to it, along with his gentle sucking. Something about the way he does it adds to the intensity of my orgasm, which causes an unexpected whimper to fall from my lips.

Only when I'm so sensitive that I have to push his head away does Oliver stop. Even then, he stares at my cock longingly, almost like he's disappointed he can't continue. It's his own damn fault. How am I supposed to last when he's so good at this?

"Get up here." Grabbing him, I yank him up and slam my lips to his. He strokes his tongue into my mouth, and I suck my cum off it with a groan.

Although I can tell he doesn't want to, Oliver breaks off the kiss first. "How're you feeling?"

"Much better," I pant as I lean closer. *Just can't get enough.*

"Good." He kisses me again. "Now let's get you some breakfast."

. . .

The morning flies by. Rhett and Wren don’t come downstairs at all, so my hope is that they’re sleeping. It gives Oliver and I some time to work on Wren’s surprise before our plans for the afternoon. The distraction is a godsend, considering I would’ve tried to work otherwise, even though I’ve hit a temporary dead end until I can talk to Aubrey.

When she arrives around one, Rhett and Wren have just finished breakfast, and Oliver and I have just finished lunch. I’m happy they slept this late, honestly. Both of them still look exhausted.

Aubrey’s driver escorts her to the door but doesn’t come in. It’s a relief—it’s another signal that Ludo trusts us, and it also means we can speak freely.

The moment we’ve shut the door, Aubrey sighs with relief and pushes her dark curls behind her shoulder. She’s wearing high-waisted shorts with a pale pink crop top that contrasts beautifully against her dark skin.

“I told him he didn’t have to walk me to the door, but he insisted.” She rolls her eyes. “I can’t wait until I don’t have to deal with Ludo and his rules anymore.”

“At least he didn’t try to come in,” Oliver says.

“Oh, I would’ve put my foot down at that.” Aubrey brightens when she sees Wren. “Hey, beautiful.”

“Hey.” Wren grins, and they embrace, although it’s slightly awkward considering Aubrey is holding a dress bag.

“Wanna try on your bridesmaid dress?”

“Oooh! Of course I do.”

“Perfect.” Aubrey glances at me and the guys. “And I’m assuming we have a lot to talk about as well?”

“Definitely,” I reply. “We can talk in the living room.”

Wren takes the dress from Aubrey and disappears, probably to change in the bathroom. Once we've sat down in the living room, Rhett doesn't waste any time.

"Have you seen my brothers?"

"I have. They both seem to be doing perfectly fine. Benny is shaken—I mean, Ludo basically had him kidnapped—but having Andrew around is helping with that."

"And what about the rat in Ludo's organization? Is there any news on that?" I ask. "Or, more specifically, is the heat off Andrew?"

"One of Ludo's guys was able to confirm that Andrew's phone has been hacked. Ludo is still being cautious, but it's more out of fear that Andrew will make another naive mistake." Aubrey rolls her eyes. "The whole thing isn't helping with his aversion to technology. He already looks at his phone like it's going to grow talons and attack him."

Rhett blows out a long breath and sags into the couch. "Just as long as Andrew isn't at any unneeded risk."

"Ludo isn't an irrational man," Aubrey says. "When he sees logic, he reacts accordingly. As long as his ego doesn't get in the way, that is. That doesn't mean he's not unreasonably cruel at times, but most of his actions are evidence-based."

"Which is why he hates technology, right?" Oliver asks.

Aubrey nods. "He's paranoid of being hacked or of storing the wrong data in the wrong place and getting caught by the authorities. It's why he doesn't have security cameras at the mansion. And it's also why—ohhh, Wren! You look *gorgeous!"*

We all follow Aubrey's gaze. Wren is standing near the entrance to the living room in a floor-length, pale pink gown. The fabric pools at her feet,

probably because it’s meant to be worn with heels.

Wren shifts from foot to foot. Both her arms are behind her. “Um. Can someone zip me up?”

I’m closest to her, so I volunteer. The zipper is infuriatingly tiny, but I’m also distracted by the curve of Wren’s spine. Before I pull up the zipper, I trace a finger up her back, smirking when it makes her shiver.

“Beautiful,” I say once I’m finished. Squeezing her waist, I drop a kiss on her shoulder. “And it seems to fit well.”

“I gave Aubrey my measurements the other day.” With a little laugh, Wren adds, “Glad I measured correctly.”

Slowly, Aubrey walks around Wren, examining the dress from every angle. “It’s perfect.”

The girls chat for a few minutes about random wedding details. Bouquets, the other bridesmaids, rehearsal details, etc. The whole time, Rhett shifts restlessly, tapping his fingers on his leg. When the conversation starts to take a turn toward table dressings, he cuts in as gently as he can.

“I know this is stuff you two need to talk about,” he says. “And Wren—sweetheart, you look beautiful. But we need to talk about Ludo.”

Aubrey claps her hands together. “Right! Of course.”

“I’ll go get changed,” Wren says. “Um . . . Ell?” She turns her back toward me, looking over her shoulder.

“I’ll come with you.”

The walk through the hallway is short. Once we’re in the bathroom, Wren gives me a quizzical look. “Do you need to use the toilet?”

“No. Just wanted a moment alone with you.” Slowly, I unzip her dress and leave a trail of kisses down her spine as I do. “This dress is tempting my self-control.”

With an amused huff, Wren turns around. Her eyes are sparkling the way they always do when we remind her just how attracted we are to her. “I didn’t realize the dress was sexy.”

“You *didn’t?”* I groan. “Jesus, Wren.”

She shrugs, which makes the fabric slip lower down her breasts. “I think it’s pretty. Just not sexy.”

“Well,” I say, my gaze dropping to her body. “Let me tell you that you are one hundred percent wrong. Objectively.”

“Objectively?” Wren raises an eyebrow.

“Ask Oliver and Rhett. They’ll back me up.” With a kiss to her cheek, I step away. If we didn’t have such an important conversation to get to, I’d fuck her right here, but I don’t want to keep Rhett waiting. “See you in a few, love.”

When I get back to the living room, Oliver throws me a knowing smirk as I plop into one of the armchairs across from him and Rhett on the couch. We wait for Wren to get back, and then we waste no time.

“We need to know everything you know about Ludo,” I say. “It’s a lot of info, I get that. But anything could help.”

Aubrey pulls a flash drive out of her pocket and hands it to me. “I came prepared. Everything I gave to Sparrow is on there. Notes, a couple audio clips of conversations I recorded, random pictures of papers I found, the works. There’s also a blueprint of his mansion, which I figured would be useful.”

“Definitely. Thank you.” I hand the drive to Rhett, who already has his laptop open. He must’ve grabbed it when I helped Wren with her dress.

“Be careful with it,” Aubrey says. “Other than the copy Sparrow has, there aren’t any backups. I didn’t want to risk getting caught.”

“Makes sense. I’m sure this felt risky enough.”

She nods solemnly. “I’ve got more than what’s on that drive, too. Stuff that feels extra important that I didn’t record anywhere.”

“We’re all ears,” Rhett says. It’s a miracle that only a hint of impatience comes through in his tone.

“As I mentioned earlier, Ludo hates technology,” Aubrey says. “Obviously he can’t get away from it completely, but he treats every device like it has a mind of its own and will betray him the second it gets the chance to.

“Because of that, he doesn’t keep records around. Not of his criminal activities, that is. I overheard a couple of his men complaining about how they think it’s overkill. If you were to search any of his properties, you wouldn’t find a shred of evidence of illegal activities. Unless you know where to look, that is.”

At that, Oliver raises an eyebrow. “And you do?”

“Purely by accident,” she replies. “Ludo has a private billiard room that he uses for meetings and relaxing. It’s got the works—a pool table, a full bar, expensive leather couches, et cetera. It looks like something out of a movie.

“When I first moved in with Ludo, he told me I wasn’t allowed in there. So of course, I snuck in once or twice. I thought it was like his man cave or whatever, and he was just protective of the space. But the second time I was in there, I realized that wasn’t it at all.

“I was pouring myself a drink behind the bar when I dropped the cap to one of the bottles. It was pure luck, but as I was bent over to pick it up, I heard the door open.

“Obviously, I didn’t want to get caught somewhere I wasn’t supposed to be, so I stayed out of sight. But I managed to peek around the edge of the bar and watch without Ludo realizing.

“He has a hidden safe behind one of the paintings that’s up on the wall. I didn’t get a chance to see the contents—just what he put inside it, which was a small hard drive.

“After that, I started keeping a closer eye on the room. I can’t always tell when he’s taking the drive out of the safe because he knows how to be discreet, but I’m pretty sure he updates the contents once a week.”

Oliver has been peering at Rhett’s laptop, but now he moves his gaze to Aubrey. One of his legs is bouncing. “Any idea what’s on the drive?”

“Considering he keeps it hidden and locked away, I’d say it’s evidence of his crimes that he has to keep around. His books, maybe records of agreements, things like that? But I don’t know for sure.”

“Everything on here is definitely helpful,” Rhett says without looking up from his laptop. “But like you said, nothing horribly incriminating. That drive could be the key to our whole plan.”

“Do you know the combination?” Oliver asks Aubrey.

“No. Wouldn’t matter if I did, anyway. Ludo changes all his passwords, PINs, and codes weekly. Some he even switches up daily.”

Dammit. These security measures make sense for the most part, but how the hell are we supposed to get to the drive?

“Is the room guarded?” I ask.

Aubrey shakes her head. “That would be too conspicuous. I don’t think anyone other than Ludo knows the safe is there, and I believe his plan is to keep it that way. To everyone around, it’s his private recreation and meeting room.”

“Do you think you could sneak in there one last time?” I ask.

“I could try,” she says hesitantly. “But I think Ludo is beginning to realize that I know more than I’m letting on. I’ve noticed some of his men watching me more closely since we got back from Florida, so I’d prefer not to risk it.”

“If he’s acting suspicious of you, there’s no way we’re putting you in a dangerous situation,” Oliver says. “You’ve already helped enough. I’m sure we can manage to get in there ourselves.”

“We’ll need to know more about Ludo’s security,” I say. “And even then, we’ll probably require some type of distraction.”

“Well,” Oliver says thoughtfully, “there’s one very big distraction coming up in a couple weeks.”

I frown. “You mean the wedding?”

Oliver nods.

“I won’t be much help that day,” Aubrey says. “And there’s definitely no way I’ll be able to sneak off. Not with family, friends, a full bridal party, and a husband who’ll be dragging me around for the entirety of the reception so he can meet my parents’ friends.”

“That’s fine,” I say. “I’m not sure it’ll work, anyway. The wedding will come with extra security, I’d imagine, considering it’s happening at the mansion.”

“Actually,” Aubrey says, “that area of the house won’t be too heavily guarded. The billiard room is closer to the bedrooms and guest rooms, which is where a lot of my extended family is staying. There’s not anything to guard over there—except the safe, of course.”

“But adding extra men to keep an eye on the room would only make it obvious Holloway is hiding something over there,” I say.

“Exactly. Plus, I asked him not to add too many more patrols to that area of the house. I don’t want my family feeling like they’re being watched. Ludo is so set on solidifying the connection with my family that he agreed immediately.”

“Well, that’s convenient,” Oliver says brightly.

Rhett stands. “I just sent the mansion blueprint files to the printer. Be back in a second.”

I start pacing. Even without more eyes on that part of the mansion, sneaking into Ludo’s billiard room will be risky. If any of us got caught in there, what would our excuse be? That we got lost looking for the bathroom? No one would believe that for a second, especially since we’d have a safe cracker with us.

Speaking of, how the hell are we supposed to sneak one of those in? It’s easy enough to get our hands on one, but it’s not small enough to hide in a pocket.

“. . . get there fairly early the day of for hair, makeup, and photos,” Aubrey is telling Wren.

Right. Wren is in the bridal party. She’ll be able to roam the mansion without extra suspicion.

My stomach turns with dread at the thought of Wren getting caught while she’s cracking the safe. Yet it’s the thing that makes the most sense. Bridesmaids perform lots of duties, including running to the bride’s bedroom for her to, say, grab her lipstick. It’s the perfect cover.

But if she gets hurt or caught . . . *Dammit.* We can’t put her in undue danger. This is exactly what I was afraid of.

I can’t let anything happen to her. I can’t let anything happen to any *of them.*

“Ell?” Wren touches my arm lightly, and I realize I have no memory of her coming near me. “You look like you’re gonna puke.”

“I’m fine.” But the words come out of my mouth funny, and the room feels like it’s getting smaller and smaller. “I just . . .”

Focus, Elliot. They need you.

It can’t be Wren. She’s not ready.

“I’ll think of another way,” I mumble.

“Another way?” Wren asks. “What’re you talking about?”

“Ell. Hey.” Oliver puts an arm around me, taking some of my weight. As he leads me to a chair, he says something, but I don’t catch it.

“I’m good,” I say, even though it feels like something is constricting my chest.

What if I can’t do this? What if we mess up the plan and something goes wrong and one of us doesn’t make it? Or none of us do?

Chills sweep through my body. We can’t lose anyone else. Not when we’ve made it so far.

“Elliot,” Oliver says as he kneels in front of me. “You’re gonna be okay. I promise.”

But I can’t believe him. How can I believe him? We’re stuck. Helplessly, hopelessly stuck.

Oliver grasps my hands, but I barely feel him. All I can think is that we’re destined to fail. We’ve worked so hard, for so long, but what if we can’t finish what we started?

“O,” I say, not entirely sure why I do.

All I know is that I’m slipping, and I don’t know how to stop myself from falling.

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Chapter Seven

Oliver

I’m pretty damn familiar with panic attacks. There was a point when I was having them on a near-daily basis, so I know the signs. But never in the fourteen years that I’ve known Elliot have I seen those signs on him. He’s always been the stable one—the one you could rely on no matter what.

Taking his trembling hands in mine is as heartbreaking as it is unsettling. I don’t think I’ve seen Elliot this distraught since Sammy’s funeral.

“I’ll find another way,” he says again in between short gasps.

“The only thing you’re gonna do right now is focus on me,” I say calmly. “You feel my thumbs rubbing your hands?”

It takes him a second, but he nods.

“Good. That’s good, Ell. Now tell me what you smell.”

He has to take a deep breath or two, which is an added bonus. “Vanilla. I . . . I smell you.”

“What’s going on?” Rhett asks as he reenters the room. He drops the blueprints onto the table before cautiously crouching next to me.

“He’ll be okay,” I say. “Take one of his hands.”

Rhett does, his frown deepening.

“You feel Rhett’s callouses?” I ask, guiding Elliot’s fingers over the rough parts of Rhett’s hands.

“Y-yeah.”

“And what color is Rhett’s shirt?”

“Black,” Elliot mutters.

“Yeah. Can you find some other things in here that are black? Maybe take a deep breath while you do?”

Elliot inhales slowly as his eyes search the room. “The vase. The picture frame. The—I don’t want her to die, Ol.”

“She’s not going to,” I say soothingly. “Look at me.”

When his gaze returns to mine, I reach up with my free hand and wipe away his tears. That panicked look is still in his eyes.

For a couple minutes, I direct his attention toward anything other than his thoughts. I have him pick out objects that are different colors and textures, which is something he’s done for me thousands of times.

It’s unnerving to have the roles reversed like this. Elliot has always prided himself on being our rock. Seeing him like this has doubt creeping through my mind.

Does he really think we can’t do this? Or is all the stress finally too much for him? It was bound to happen eventually.

Wren comes back with the glass of water I asked her to get. As she sets it on the coffee table, she casts me a worried look.

“Thanks, princess.” I give her a reassuring smile. “Ell, can you take a couple more deep breaths for me?” As he does, I squeeze his hand. “That’s it. And you see Wren? Look at her. She’s okay. She’s safe, and we’re not gonna let anything happen to her.”

“But what—what if . . .”

“No what ifs,” I say softly. “Not right now. Just focus on us.” I take one of Elliot’s hands and place it on Rhett’s chest. “Feel his heartbeat?”

With a nod, Elliot closes his eyes and sighs.

“Count each beat,” Rhett says as he holds Elliot’s hand in place. It’s one of the few things he’s usually able to do that can help me get through a panic attack.

“One,” Elliot mumbles. “Two. Three . . . I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m not supposed—”

“No apologizing,” Rhett says. “Not for this, Ell.”

He shakes his head. “We need to make a plan. Aubrey—Wren—I’m sorry—”

“Shhh,” I soothe as I stroke his hair. “Wren, c’mere.” Once she’s close, I place Elliot’s hand in hers. “Keep counting.”

He starts from one again. Wren brings his hand to her lips, kissing his knuckles gently. My hope is that having us all close like this will help Elliot feel supported, but it might overwhelm him, so I keep a watchful eye on him.

Thankfully, having Wren near seems to calm him down more. Within a couple minutes, Elliot’s breathing steadies out, and he doesn’t look so disoriented. When I think he’s ready, I hand him the glass of water. He takes a couple slow sips before his head dips forward.

“Fuck, I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened. I’ve never . . .”

“It’s okay,” Wren says. She’s on her knees, his hand still clasped in both of hers. “We understand.”

Blowing out a breath, Elliot’s eyes land on Aubrey. “How long do you have before you have to leave?”

“I’ve got all day,” she says gently. “Don’t push yourself.”

“Ell,” I say cautiously, already knowing he’s going to hate what I’m about to say. “I think you should give it a rest. We can come up with a plan while you let yourself relax.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Please, Elliot?” Wren asks as she looks up at him. “I’m worried about you.”

He laughs tiredly, and tears begin to well in his eyes again. “I’m worried about *you.”*

“But you can take a break,” I urge. “We can update you on everything we learn.”

“I can’t.”

Rhett’s fists clench at his sides. “Ell—”

“I can’t,” he repeats, and his tone holds no room for argument. “If I stop, I’ll just go right back to where I was. It’s either move forward or drown in all this anxiety, so I’m moving forward, dammit.”

There’s a beat of silence before Rhett nods. “Fine.”

“Can you tell us what you were thinking of that set you off?” I ask.

With a grimace, Elliot pulls his gaze back to Wren. “I was thinking that it makes the most sense for Wren to break into the safe during the wedding reception.”

She gulps but does her best to put on a brave face. “Because no one will think of me as a threat?”

Elliot’s hand slides from Rhett’s chest to cup Wren’s cheek. “And you’ll have a plethora of believable excuses for being in that part of the house. Since it’s so close to the bedrooms and you’re in the bridal party, you can easily claim that you’re grabbing something for Aubrey.”

“Except Wren’s a horrible liar,” I interject.

“I can learn,” she says.

“We have what, two weeks until the wedding?” I ask. “That’s not much time, princess.”

“I can do it,” Wren insists. “I want to help.”

“It’s dangerous.” Elliot’s thumb skates across her cheek. “I can’t let anything happen to you, love. We wouldn’t be able to come with you. If something went wrong, how would we know? We wouldn’t be able to protect you.”

“It’s more dangerous for you than it is for me,” she counters. “And as *you* already pointed out, I’ll have justifiable reasons to be in that part of the mansion.”

“I can try to get more details on what security will look like during the wedding,” Aubrey says. “I can play it off as wanting to inform my family about what to expect, which I’d prefer to do anyway.”

“That’d be helpful,” I say, watching Wren’s eyes flare with hope.

“If we know how many men will be watching that part of the house and where exactly they’ll be, we can probably figure out a way to get you in and out without being seen,” Rhett tells Wren.

Elliot shakes his head. “But if Wren can do it without getting caught, why can’t it be one of us? On the off chance that something goes wrong, we’re more likely to be able to defend ourselves in a fight.”

“Because Ludo might not tell me everything,” Aubrey cuts in. “He doesn’t trust anyone fully, and considering he’s trying to find a rat, he’s being extra selective about who he shares information with. I can ask for him to give me security details, but that doesn’t mean he will.”

“And again, if Wren gets caught, there’s no reason for things to turn violent,” I say. “She can just say she was grabbing something for Aubrey.”

“And if she’s caught holding the safe cracker?”

“Could it fit in a makeup bag?” Aubrey asks. “If so, problem solved.”

Rubbing his chin, Rhett says, “Depends on the safe. Did you get a look at it?”

“Um. Sort of? I know the brand name and that it wasn’t digital.”

“Perfect.” Rhett grabs his laptop and pulls up all the different models available from the brand Aubrey gives him. He’s able to narrow it down to ones with a dial instead of a keypad, so she identifies the one Ludo has quickly.

The more we explore the idea of Wren retrieving the hard drive, the more distressed Elliot gets. He’s just sitting there, his expression growing more and more grim. Odds are, he’s trying to do exactly what he promised and find another way to get to the safe. But the more we develop our plan for Wren to do it, the more sense it makes.

I’m nervous about it, too, but I don’t know how much longer we can stay in our current state. We’re all so exhausted and stressed, and I know I’m not the only one wishing this was already over. Something has to give.

“Once you’re in the billiard room,” Aubrey says to Wren, “you’ll be perfectly safe. Ludo will be too occupied during the reception to get away, and his men know not to go in there without permission. The door is usually locked, but I stole a key once and made a copy.”

“You did?” Wren asks with surprise. “That sounds risky.”

Aubrey shrugs. “I was feeling quite spiteful when I first had to move in. Now, back to the point. As long as we time you entering and leaving the

billiard room correctly, it doesn't matter if you get caught in a hallway. Not since the safe cracker can fit in a makeup bag."

"And if she gets caught leaving the room?" Elliot asks.

"Then she pretends she's lost?" Aubrey suggests. "It's a large mansion."

"I don't like it," Elliot mutters.

"We knew we'd have to take extra risks when we got to this point," I remind him gently.

"I know. But those risks weren't supposed to . . ." As he trails off, he glances at Wren.

They weren't supposed to involve her.

After a moment of silence, Wren clears her throat. "Let's say I get caught and can't pull off a reasonable excuse. What's the worst-case scenario? Ludo loses his trust in you guys? Kills all of us?"

"Most likely," I reply, not wanting to add on that he wouldn't *just* kill us.

"And what's the worst-case scenario if one of you three does it?" Aubrey asks, catching on to what Wren is getting at.

"The same thing," Rhett says.

Elliot shakes his head miserably. "You're missing the fact that if it's one of us, we can probably convince Ludo that Wren wasn't involved at all. We could keep her safe, even if he turns against us."

"And you're missing the fact that Ludo is a cruel bastard," Rhett replies. "It doesn't matter if he thinks Wren isn't in on us taking him down. He'll use her to hurt us anyway."

Of course it'd be Rhett who makes sure to not leave anything unsaid.

"So there's no room for mistakes. Just like normal," I say. "We can handle this, Elliot."

He looks like he wants to protest, but he must be too exhausted to try. Raising his hands in surrender, he slouches into the chair. “Fine.”

“So Wren will get the hard drive, and then what?” Aubrey asks. “Are you guys keeping it and hoping Ludo will be distracted enough with searching for me that he doesn’t realize it’s missing? Or are you getting everything off it and then putting it back?”

“No,” Elliot groans. “We’re not doubling our chances of everything falling apart. Ludo doesn’t have cameras, so as long as no one sees Wren, he’ll have no clue we took it. Most likely, he’ll pin it on his rat, as long as Ludo hasn’t found them by then. Or he’ll pin it on you, Aubrey, since you’ll disappear at the same time the drive does.”

“And I’ll be perfectly safe from his wrath, so that’s fine,” she says.

“Okay. So we keep the hard drive.” Rhett turns to Aubrey. “Then we continue on with the reception like nothing happened, and once everyone is gone, we get you out?”

She nods. “I can tell you that Ludo’s normal security doesn’t leave much room for sneaking out of the mansion. He has men patrolling the perimeter of the property at all times, and there’s almost never a window of time where a part of the yard is going unwatched.”

“Distraction?” I suggest. “I love a good distraction.”

To my relief, a small smile tugs at the edges of Elliot’s mouth. “That’s for sure.”

As we toss around ideas for a diversion that could work, some of Elliot’s anxiety seems to ease. Wren is still on the floor holding both his hands, which I think is helping to soothe him.

Eventually, we come up with a solid plan. It involves Finn since he doesn’t run in the same circles as us. Ludo’s men won’t recognize him,

which is exactly what we need.

Finn will have to disable the airbags in one of his cars and wreck it, but he won't be going fast enough to hurt himself badly. As long as he agrees—which he will—we're all set.

Rhett also orders a safe identical to Ludo's so Wren can practice breaking into it. That seems to ease some of the anxiety *she's* trying to hide. As for getting a safe cracker, one of us texts Finn, and he—of course—already has one. The man has his hands in so many cookie jars that it's beginning to get ridiculous.

By the time we have a plan that everyone is happy with, Elliot is mostly stable. It helps that we're taking every precaution possible. It's still nerve-wracking, but we have a couple weeks to help Wren prepare.

Aubrey and Wren start going over the blueprints, so I perch on the arm of Elliot's chair. When he turns to meet my gaze, he attempts a smile.

"Doing okay?" My fingers skirt over his jaw.

"As okay as can be expected." Elliot pauses before sighing. "We have to be careful, Ol."

"Aren't we always?"

"Extra careful, then."

Leaning down, I kiss his forehead. "We've got this. And if we don't, we can ask Finn to help us during the reception. You know he would."

"Without a doubt," Rhett says. He's on the couch with his laptop open, but he's been watching us silently. Now he shuts it and moves closer toward us. "If you want him on standby the night of the wedding, he'd happily do it."

"I think we can handle it, though," I say. "We can get Wren ready."

She must hear me say her name because Wren looks up from where she's studying the blueprints on the coffee table. "What?"

"Love . . ." Elliot runs a hand over his face. "You're sure about this?"

After exchanging a glance with Aubrey, Wren nods. "I'm positive. It's the option that's most likely to work, and I think deep down, you know that."

Grudgingly, he mumbles, "Yeah."

At least one of us can talk some sense into him.

"We'll make sure she's more than prepared," Aubrey says, "and I'll do everything I can to learn more about Ludo's security plans for that area of the house."

"And I'll be careful," Wren adds. "*Extra* careful."

"We know, princess."

I have faith in her, and I know Elliot does, too. I just hope he can find it before his anxiety becomes too much.

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Chapter Eight

Wren

“Stop looking away.”

With a huff, I lock gazes with Oliver. “I didn’t even realize I broke eye contact.”

Oliver’s eyes sparkle with amusement. “I know. It’s hard to keep track of everything your body does, but you’ll get better at it.”

The corners of Rhett’s mouth tip up in a small smile. “We had to teach Oliver how to lie, too.”

“Really?”

Oliver shrugs. “Didn’t have a reason to do it much when I was a kid. My mom’s not very strict.”

“I learned from an early age by watching my mom,” Elliot says. “She habitually lies to my dad, and I realized that she always mixes in some amount of truth, which makes it easier and probably more believable.”

“Oh. That makes sense, I suppose.”

“That’s why we’re having Aubrey actually ask you to go get her makeup bag,” Elliot says. “Not only will you be able to tell a little truth if someone

asks what you're doing, but other people will overhear, so they'll be able to back up your claim that you're just doing what Aubrey asked."

"Right. But if I get caught leaving the billiard room, I have to also pull off saying that I'm lost."

"*And* that you just happened to find the door unlocked," Oliver adds. "But only if someone else points it out. Since it's Ludo's private room, it's possible that the guys who work for him don't even know it stays locked."

"Got it," I say slowly. *I don't know if I can do that.*

"We'll get you there, sweetheart," Rhett replies, and it takes me a moment to realize I said that last part out loud.

"So let's try again," Oliver says. "And remember, maintain eye contact."

"Okay, but I look away sometimes during normal conversations, don't I?" I ask.

"Yep. But you *always* look away when you lie. It's one of your tells. A common one, so don't feel bad."

With a groan, I slouch into my seat. "What else do I do?"

"You bite your lip a lot. The inside of your cheek, too. And after you finish, while you're waiting to see if you pulled it off, your eyes get all wide." Oliver grins. "It's pretty cute, actually."

"So don't look away, don't widen my eyes, and don't bite my lip." It's a lot to focus on at once, but I have to try. This has to work.

"Ready?" Elliot says.

"Ready."

"What are you doing here?" Elliot asks, his tone firm and a touch intimidating.

"Just grabbing Aubrey's makeup bag." I slightly raise the one I grabbed from upstairs to use as a prop. While I do, I keep my gaze fixed on Elliot.

Don’t bite your lip. Or your cheek. And don’t open your eyes more.

“Now you look like you’re trying to shoot lasers out of your eyes.” Oliver is barely holding back a laugh. “Just look at him the way you normally do.”

“Okay.” Rolling back my shoulders, I take a deep breath to reset myself. “Again.”

“What’re you doing here?” Elliot asks.

“Oh, Aubrey asked me to grab her makeup bag. Gotta do a quick touch up.”

“You grimaced,” Rhett says. “You can’t grimace. It’s a dead giveaway.”

I drop my face into my hands. “I’m hopeless.”

“You’re not,” Oliver says. “It just takes practice, and you’re already getting better. Do you want to take a little break? We can focus on something else?”

Something else? Rhett already had me in the gym this morning for self-defense training. After our meeting yesterday with Aubrey, he’s also bent on helping me have more situational awareness. We spent hours on the blueprints of Ludo’s home until the layout was burned into my mind. He also has plans to take me to places I’m less familiar with to teach me what I should be on the lookout for.

It’s overwhelming to say the least, but all three of them are patient teachers. I’ll be fine as long as I have them.

“I want to stay focused on this,” I say. “Let’s go again?”

Oliver squeezes my knee. “We can go as many times as you’d like, princess.”

I smile. “Again, then.”

For the rest of the afternoon, they coach me on every little thing I do that could indicate I'm lying. Even when I make the same mistakes over and over again, they never show an ounce of annoyance. I appreciate it—knowing I'm not irritating them makes it easier for me to concentrate.

By the time the guys finally deem one of my lies believable, my stomach is growling. Not only am I hungry, but I'm *exhausted.* Who knew learning to lie would take so much energy?

"I'll throw some lasagna in the oven." Elliot stands from his spot on the couch and stretches. "You did a fantastic job, love. We'll do this a couple more times with different questions, and by then, I think you'll be ready to go. For this, anyway."

That's a relief. Over the past twenty-four hours, Elliot has come around to the idea of me breaking into the safe. I can't fault him for his original stance. Our very first weekend together, this is exactly why he didn't want to start anything serious with me.

The thing is, at this point, I'm in deep enough that there's no escaping the potential danger that comes along with being with them. Elliot—all three of them, really—want to be able to protect me, but they need to be able to take risks. And no matter how much we all wish I was, I'm not immune to the consequences of their actions.

"I'll help with dinner," I say as Elliot makes his way out of the living room.

Oliver catches my wrist as I walk past. "You did well, princess. I'm proud of how far you got today."

Rhett nods in agreement, and warmth floods my veins. They're never shy with their praise, but that doesn't make it mean any less.

"Thank you." I lean down and kiss Rhett's cheek.

Over the past few days, I've caught him watching me with concern written all over his face multiple times. I think he's worried that I'll come to my senses at some point and realize I *am* afraid of him, but that's not going to happen. I trust him.

In the kitchen, Elliot is pulling an aluminum pan out of the refrigerator. "Gotta make more," he mutters to himself. He mentioned that they like to meal prep for when they get bogged down with work, so I bet this is the remainder of their last batch.

"Need help?" I ask.

"I think I'm good. Although I suppose we should have some vegetables. Or, like, a salad."

I open the fridge, but I'm greeted by mostly bare shelves. "Um . . ."

He groans. "There's not much in there, huh?"

"Not really." I shut the fridge doors.

"I meant to go to the grocery store this morning," Elliot says on a sigh. "But then I overslept, and then I was working, and . . . well, here we are. Fuck, and we're behind on laundry, too. And just about every chore you could think of."

"Not all of them," I say. "I saw Oliver with the vacuum this morning."

"Yeah, but that's for—" He cuts himself off. "I guess that counts."

"And we have some time before the oven preheats, so why don't you and I start a load of laundry." Taking his hand, I tug him into the pantry, which leads into the laundry room.

Oh, wow. He wasn't exaggerating. There are piles of dirty clothes everywhere. At the sight, Elliot lets out a distressed sound.

"We're normally really good at keeping up with chores and stuff," he says as we gather up a load and throw it in the washer. "The past month has

just been . . .”

“Hell,” I finish for him softly as he tosses a detergent pod in with the clothes.

“Not all of it. Some of it’s been damn near perfect. But the rest of it? I don’t even know what day it is anymore.” Elliot closes the door and presses a couple buttons.

“All I know is that today’s Sunday. And that’s only because I got a text from my boss this morning asking if I could come back and work my normal hours starting tomorrow.”

Elliot freezes with his finger hovering over the start button. “What did you say?”

“Haven’t responded yet. Obviously I can’t go back to work next week. We have too much going on. But I’m not sure how long she’ll let me take off before she replaces me permanently.”

“How do you feel about that?” His gaze is fixed on the button. “About being replaced permanently, that is.”

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think I have much of a choice.”

“Oh?”

“I can’t go back. Not now. And I can’t keep my boss hanging like this. It’s not fair to her or my coworkers to keep the shop understaffed until I make a decision.”

With a short breath of relief, he presses start. “So you’re gonna quit?”

“I, um . . . I think so.”

“You know we’re good with that, right?” he asks as we move back to the kitchen. “I’ll be honest, I don’t know what life will look like once we’re done with Ludo. But I do know that we don’t have to worry about money. I

mean, I'm sure we'll do *something*. Maybe we'll keep taking jobs, or maybe we'll go back to the dreams we had before. I don't know."

Dreams we had before.

"Like your bookshop idea?"

He narrows his eyes. "Ol tell you about that?"

"Yeah. We had a similar conversation, and I told him I used to want to open a book and coffee shop."

"Is that so?" His tone is oddly thoughtful, and he's looking at me curiously.

"Mmhmm. Used to dream about it all the time."

"It'd be nice, wouldn't it?" Elliot smiles, and even though it fades quickly, a modicum of hope is left in his eyes.

"It would be."

The oven beeps, startling us both. Elliot pulls the lid off the pan before throwing the lasagna in. Once he's closed the oven door, he leans against the counter and opens his arms to me. I enter them and press my face into his neck.

"Thank you," he says quietly after a minute.

"Thank you?"

"You've changed our lives, Wren. And our future. You've added so much light, so much happiness. These past few weeks . . . I can't imagine them without you, and I can't imagine our future without you, either. It's hard to believe the ball was only a month ago. Sometimes it feels like it's been a whole year."

"I've caught myself thinking the same thing a couple times," I reply. "I guess it makes sense. We may still be at the beginning of our relationship, but we've already been through so much together. The Williams job, Adam

trashing my apartment, Jordan kidnapping me . . . it's a *lot.* We've had no choice but to fast-track things. We've seen parts of each other we potentially wouldn't've seen for years in different circumstances."

"True." His hand strokes up and down my spine, which makes me relax into his touch. "And without you, I don't think we'd be where we are right now. I wish we never let Jordan get his hands on you, but we wouldn't know about Andrew and Benny if it wasn't for you."

Oh. "I hadn't thought of that."

"I'm not saying I'm happy you were kidnapped," he adds quickly. "If I could go back and take your place, I would. But . . . well, I *am* happy that you fought me that very first weekend. I was too scared to follow the pull we all felt, but you were brave enough to face your fears."

"Elliot," I whisper.

His hand pauses on my lower back, and he presses me closer so our bodies are touching in as many places as possible. "I'm happy you fought for us, love. Not just because of the progress we've made in regard to Ludo, but because . . . because of you. God, Wren, I love you so much it terrifies me, but it drives me, too. I want a world where you're safe. I *need* a world where you're safe, and I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure you get it."

It may not be the first time he's said he loves me, but butterflies still come to life in my stomach. With a shaky sigh, Elliot dips his head down and brushes his lips against mine. They're soft and inviting, and his kiss is a welcome escape in the midst of so much pain.

As the kiss deepens, Elliot practically clings to me. I do the same, unsure of how else to demonstrate how much he means to me.

"I need you to be safe," he whispers after we pull away.

“I will be.” I squeeze his shoulder gently. “I can do this.”

For the briefest of moments, I think he might cry. But he just pulls me into him until my head is settled against his shoulder. He’s soft and hard at the same time, and I inhale deeply, savoring the light scent of sandalwood and oranges.

“I know you’re worried about the wedding,” I say after a moment of silence. “I am, too. But I need *you* to be safe.”

Releasing a long sigh, Elliot drops his head. “I know. And I know you breaking into the safe is the smartest way to go about this. But I can’t stop worrying that something is going to go horribly wrong.”

“I’ll be okay,” I say as confidently as I can. Rising up on my tiptoes, I plant a kiss on his lips. “I’ll keep training, and I’ll be ready.”

With a shuddering breath, he nods. I’m not used to seeing him like this, and I don’t think he’s used to this level of anxiety, either.

“I’m sorry,” he mutters. “I’m supposed to be the brave one, but lately all I can think about is . . .” He grimaces and shakes his head. “I feel like I’ve been stripped of a layer of armor I didn’t even know I had.”

“I know the feeling,” I whisper as I shut my eyes against the images of that cold, dark basement. The water, the mounting pressure in my lungs, the absolute terror that plagued my mind. I shiver.

“When this is all over, we’re taking you wherever you want to go,” Elliot says. “And we’re going to forget about all of this for a week and just be. We can explore a new city, spend time with each other, and be normal.”

“I’d like that.”

A *ping* sounds from Elliot’s pocket, and he sighs before fishing his phone out. After staring at the screen for a second, his face falls. “Fuck.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Our security system lets us know whenever someone gets close to the perimeter of our property, especially the driveway. It’s connected to our phones, so when it’s one of us, it says that as well. But we’re all here.” He moves to one of the windows that faces the front yard, and his frown deepens. “That’s my mom’s car. What the fuck are my parents doing here?”

“Ell.” Oliver jogs into the kitchen, followed closely by Rhett. “Did you see the notification?”

“Yeah. It’s my parents. I’m sorry, guys. I didn’t know they were showing up today.”

“It’s fine,” Rhett says. “But we can’t let them past the front room. We have too many incriminating things laying around right now.”

“Would it be horrible of us to pretend we’re not home?” Elliot asks hopelessly.

Rhett sighs. “We’ve got too many lights on. Let’s just see what they want and try to send them away as quickly as we can.”

“Any clue why they’re here?” Oliver asks.

“Fuck. My mom texted me this morning, but I had so many notifications that I cleared them all without looking at it.” Just as Elliot reaches for his phone, the doorbell rings. He throws me an apologetic glance. “You can stay here, love. They can be a lot.”

“Elliot,” Oliver exclaims. “That’s not fair to her.”

“Shit. I didn’t mean it like that.” Elliot’s eyes are pleading as he turns to me. “I’m not trying to hide you from them, Wren. I’m trying to keep *them* from *you.”*

“They do suck,” Oliver says. “Royally.”

“That’s putting it lightly,” Rhett grumbles before spinning on his heel and marching toward the front door.

“But we’re not keeping you hidden away,” Oliver says as he grabs my hand. “Uh—unless you actually don’t want to meet them today.”

I shrug. “It’s gotta happen sometime. Might as well be today.”

With a proud grin, Oliver pulls me after Elliot and Rhett. We get to the front room just as Rhett is pulling the door open.

“Good evening, Rhett.” A woman wearing a fitted forest green dress steps over the threshold. She’s followed closely by a man who’s wearing an expensive-looking suit.

Rhett nods, not bothering to hide his annoyance. “Kathleen. Joe.”

“Mom. Dad.” The way Elliot speaks is different than normal. It’s more polished, almost formal. His posture is different, too. He’s standing so straight you’d think he’s a kid getting his height measured, and all he cares about is getting that extra inch.

Joe grins and opens his arms, but Kathleen steps in front of him and grabs Elliot’s hands. He tenses but doesn’t pull away.

“Apologies for dropping by later than we normally do,” Kathleen says. “We had quite a busy day. But of course we had to tell you hap—” She stops abruptly when she sees me. Her expression sours before she plasters on an obviously fake smile. “Elliot, who’s this?”

“This is Wren.” Stepping back from his mother, Elliot tugs me into him and wraps an arm around my shoulders. “She’s our partner.”

Kathleen frowns as she looks me up and down, and it’s a struggle to not shrink into Elliot. That’s not the type of first impression I want to give, even if the guys don’t seem to care about her opinion.

With a smile, I say, “It’s lovely to meet you.”

When her only response is to purse her lips, her husband steps forward, takes my hand, and shakes. “Likewise. I’m Joe, and this is Kathleen, in case

you didn’t hear.”

“Mom,” Elliot says tightly.

Again, Kathleen tries to smile, but it doesn’t mask the viciousness shining in her eyes. “Hello, Wren. It’s lovely to meet you as well.” Her gaze only lingers on me for a moment before she turns her attention back to Elliot. “A new partner. When did this happen?”

“About a month ago.”

“Oh, so you’re still just getting to know each other,” she says, her composure brightening. “Testing the waters and all that.”

All three of the guys tense. Rhett opens his mouth, and the look on his face tells me things are about to get ugly, but Elliot cuts him off.

“We’re well past that stage, actually.”

Kathleen shoots Elliot a disbelieving look. “It’s only been a month, darling. You can’t truly test the waters until you’re past the honeymoon stage. Isn’t that right, Joe?”

Her husband isn’t even phased. He shoots Elliot an apologetic look before patting Kathleen’s arm. “Elliot is an adult, dearest. He’s old enough to make his own decisions. Besides, I’d say they know their relationship much better than we do.”

“Right. I suppose I’ll withhold my judgment until I know you better. If only we’d met sooner! But how could we, since Elliot didn’t even see a need to tell his mother about you. How odd.”

This bitch. I’ve seen this tactic enough to know exactly what she’s trying to do. If she thinks she can sow seeds of doubt in my mind about Elliot’s feelings for me, she’s gravely mistaken.

“Sounds like he’s had more important things to do,” I say, my tone sickeningly sweet.

Kathleen's jaw drops, and Oliver dissolves into a sudden coughing fit. Internally, I kick myself. *So much for a good first impression.*

Elliot releases a tired sigh, but his reassuring hold on me never loosens. "I know it's a big surprise. We sort of knew each other before we got together, and life has been hectic ever since. Today isn't the exception. We were actually in the middle of making dinner."

Kathleen crosses her arms, and I can't tell if the look of hurt on her face is genuine or if it's an act. "Is that an invitation? Or are you really throwing us out?"

"Mom, don't put it like that. We were planning on having a quiet night in, that's all."

With a huff, Kathleen whirls around to face her husband. "On today of all days. How could he?"

"Mom! Don't talk about me like I'm not right here." Finally, a hint of exasperation bleeds into Elliot's voice. "I didn't know you were dropping by, okay? *We have plans."*

Throwing her hands into the air, Kathleen asks, "Do I at least get to hug my son goodbye?"

"Yeah," Elliot says, almost reservedly. "Yeah, of course."

Rhett goes stiff, and his hands curl into fists.

Elliot seems reluctant to let go of me. His arm slides from my waist at a snail's pace. When he steps up to his mom, she throws me a smug smile. It doesn't last, though, because when she turns to Elliot, she gasps in horror, her gaze fixed on his neck.

"Is that . . . is that a *hickey?!"*

Again, Oliver coughs into his elbow, although he keeps it to just one this time. He catches my gaze with twinkling eyes and a grin that's barely

hidden behind his arm.

Elliot only sighs. “Mom, I’m almost twenty-nine. I can do what—”

“Much too old to still be getting hickeys, at least where they’re visible,” Kathleen exclaims. “What’re you thinking? You can’t hide that at work! And what do you mean, *almost* twenty-nine?”

“What the hell do you think it means?” Elliot snaps. “It means I’m almost—” He stops abruptly, and his eyes go wide. “Oh, shit.”

Oliver and Rhett exchange horrified glances before simultaneously checking their phones.

“What?” I ask, realizing a split second later that it would’ve been much better if I’d had the sense to keep my mouth shut.

“In love,” Kathleen spits out, her voice poisoned with bitter mockery. “Three partners. You have *three partners*, Elliot, and not a single one of them could remember your birthday?”

His birthday. *Elliot’s birthday?* Oh, shit. Oh shit oh shit oh *shit.*

“We’ve been busy,” Elliot says tiredly.

“Oh, that means nothing!” Kathleen whirls around to face Oliver and Rhett. “You two have known him for fourteen years. *Fourteen years!* And you—”

“Mom, even I forgot.”

“—can’t even do the bare minimum? I knew you were both a mistake from the second I saw you. You were always distracting Elliot from his studies and getting him in trouble.”

“I graduated top of my class! *With honors.”*

“He had plans, you know. He was going to go to Princeton. Would’ve been valedictorian, too. But no, he stayed here so he could be with the two of you.”

“You think we don’t know that?” Rhett asks dryly.

“Are you telling me you knew, and you still let it happen?” Kathleen cries. “You ruined his future, and you have the audacity to call that *love?”*

“Kathleen,” Joe hisses. “Don’t do this. Not today.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” she snaps. Then she directs her fury toward me. “And *you.* Talk about audacity. You claim that you’re in love with my son, but you don’t even know when his birthday is. Who do you think you are?”

“I never—”

“Mom.” Elliot’s voice is low with a danger that would have the hair on the back of my neck standing up if it was directed toward me.

Kathleen, however, doesn’t heed his warning. “He deserves better. He settled with Rhett and Oliver, whether any of you believe that or not. And he’s obviously settling with you if you haven’t even cared enough to ask when his birthday is.”

“Mom.”

“Oh, I’m not done, Elliot. This conversation has been a long time coming. I’ve avoided it for over a decade, and I’m done. *Done.”* She turns her glare to Rhett. “Senior year, I let you into my home. I gave you a place to stay when your own father rejected you. But over the past decade, I’ve begun to understand his position. You don’t have an ounce of gratitude in you. Maybe he was right to kick—”

“Enough,” Elliot shouts, making me jump. Every muscle in his body is tight, and his tone holds a level of fury I’ve only heard from him once before. “Don’t you ever talk to Rhett like that. Don’t you ever talk to *any* of them like that.”

“Darling—”

“No! You’re a fool if you think I settled for them, and you’re delusional if you think they stole me from you. They’re my world. My *everything*. We can talk about the reasons why I distanced myself from you another day, but it wasn’t them. It never could be. I couldn’t live without them. If something were to happen to any of them, I’d—” His voice falters. “I wouldn’t . . .”

“Ell,” Oliver says softly. He starts to move forward, but Kathleen cuts him off.

“Oh, Elliot.” She throws her arms around him, ignoring the way he flinches. “To be young and infatuated. I remember how it feels. Your emotions take over, and it clouds your judgment.”

“No.” He moves back, placing his hands on Kathleen’s shoulders to put some distance between them. “My judgment isn’t clouded. I don’t know what else I have to say or do to get you to understand that I’m happy with them. They’re the loves of my life.”

“Darling, I know that’s how you may *feel*, but—”

Elliot shakes his head. “Dad, c’mon, help me out here.”

Joe sighs. “Don’t you think maybe there’s a little truth to what your mother is saying?”

“Don’t you think you’re overstepping?” Rhett counters with a chilling glare. “Elliot is a grown-ass adult. You said so yourself mere minutes ago. He’s fully capable of thinking logically—the most capable out of any of us.”

“That doesn’t mean he shouldn’t listen to what his parents have to say,” Kathleen replies. “We know him best, after all.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Rhett says with a smug expression that I’m pretty sure he’s only using to piss Kathleen off.

“Well, at least *I* remembered his birthday.”

“Like I’ve been telling you,” Elliot says desperately, “life has been hectic lately. We’ve had a lot on our minds. That doesn’t change the fact that Rhett, Oliver, and Wren have been here for me through it all. They love me, Mom, and I love them. All three of them. And I’m tired of feeling like I have to prove it to you.”

“You can let me support you too, you know.” She lays a hand on Elliot’s shoulder, not removing it when he tries to shrug her off. “You know you can talk to me whenever you need to. I’m here for you.”

Elliot laughs, although it’s void of humor. “You really aren’t getting it, are you? *I love them.* You can’t change that.”

“Darling—”

“Get out.”

Kathleen balks. “Get out?”

Elliot shoves her hand off his shoulder. “You thought you could come into my home—*our* home—and disrespect the three people who mean the most to me? You thought I wouldn’t care? Not to mention, you have the fucking nerve to do it *on my birthday.* That’s what’s ruining today, Mom. Not the fact that they forgot. We’ve been under a lot of pressure lately. So much that even *I* forgot about my own birthday.”

“Elliot,” Joe says, “don’t do this. You’ll regret it later. Everyone’s just a touch too angry, but I think if we can all calm down, we can talk this through like mature adults.”

“There’s nothing left to say.” Elliot’s gaze drifts to me, Oliver, and Rhett. “I love them. You know I do—you’ve known for years. My life hasn’t lived up to your expectations, and I get that you’re disappointed. But it’s *my life.* How old do I have to be before you get that through your heads?”

“Elliot, darling—”

“Just go,” he says, and his voice is so detached that it takes me a second to realize the words came from him.

With a sigh, Joe tugs on Kathleen’s arm, but she doesn’t budge. Tears fill her eyes as she stares at Elliot, waiting for him to look at her.

He doesn’t. He looks at me instead, somehow smiling, before brushing some hair back from my face. As one of his arms loops around my waist, he whispers, “May I kiss you?”

I barely finish nodding before Elliot seals his lips to mine. His free hand cups my jaw tenderly, and it’s not until I hear Kathleen’s annoyed huff that I realize exactly what this kiss means.

It’s a demonstration—a show of where Elliot’s loyalties lie since his parents won’t take his word for it. So when Elliot deepens the kiss, I match his enthusiasm, and my arms come around his neck.

Rhett has barely moved during this whole conversation, but now he places himself between Elliot and his parents. “Either get out, or I’ll take great pleasure in making you leave by whatever means necessary.”

“Elliot,” Kathleen practically whines.

“Enough, Kathleen,” Joe sighs as he pulls her toward the door. “I’m sorry it came to this. And Elliot . . . happy birthday, son.”

Elliot doesn’t even respond. We aren’t kissing anymore, but he hasn’t looked away from me, and I’m trapped in his gaze. I expect to find some level of sadness or regret in his eyes, but all that’s there is unreserved devotion for us. For *me.*

Only once Rhett has slammed and locked the door does Elliot break eye contact. Even then, it’s only to close his eyes and rest his forehead against mine. No one speaks. The only sound is Elliot taking deep, controlled breaths until we hear two car doors shut and the engine turn over.

With a wince, Elliot opens his eyes and pulls back. He strokes his thumb over my cheek, and the regret I was expecting finally appears on his face. “I’m sorry I yelled.”

“I think it was pretty well warranted,” Oliver says with a shrug.

“I scared Wren.” His voice is apologetic, and he holds me gently as he kisses my forehead. “Love, I’m sorry. I should’ve kept it together.”

“I’m okay. I get it.”

He shakes his head, but I press a finger to his lips to keep him from apologizing again. If my mom and Thomas had marched in and done something similar, I’m pretty sure I would’ve yelled a whole lot more.

“I’m sorry I never asked when your birthday is,” I whisper.

“I never asked when yours is,” Elliot counters.

“Um, just a reminder,” Oliver says, his voice light with amusement, “we’ve been a little busy *keeping each other alive.* Birthdays kinda take the back burner in a situation like ours.”

“True,” Elliot mutters while he rubs his face tiredly.

“Are you okay, Ell?” Rhett asks. He’s been looking out the window this entire time, probably watching to make sure Kathleen and Joe actually leave, but now he turns to face us. “That was pretty intense.”

“It was a long time coming,” Elliot says. “Honestly, I’m mostly sorry that it took this long.”

“Do you think they’ll stay mad?” Oliver asks. “I know you’re not super close, but I don’t want you to lose them if that’s not what you want.”

“I don’t care anymore,” Elliot says.

“Ell, come one. You do, you just—”

“I don’t,” he says firmly, his gaze snapping to Oliver’s. “What I care about is the three of you knowing that I love you. I know what I feel. I

know what each of you means to me. Fuck my mom for saying that shit. She's wrong about me, and she's wrong about the three of you."

"She really hates that you two aren't close, doesn't she?" I ask.

Elliot nods. "We never really were—not in the way she thinks, anyway. Our relationship hasn't been anything better than toxic since I learned how to think independently. I mean, she's my mom. I used to think her and my dad were the coolest people on the planet. But then I got older, and they put so much pressure on me. I wasn't allowed to be my own person."

"Kathleen tried to tear us apart when she realized how close we were getting," Oliver says.

A small smile tugs at the corners of Elliot's mouth. "I threatened emancipation."

I raise an eyebrow. "Damn."

"I was only fourteen at the time," Elliot says. "But I promised my parents that the second I was old enough, I'd detach myself from them in every way possible. My mom was terrified I'd follow through."

"And that's how we got to go on fancy vacations every year," Oliver says as he throws his arm around Rhett's shoulders.

I laugh. "You're joking."

"No." Rubbing the back of his neck, Elliot lets out an embarrassed laugh. "I may have been a bit of a brat back then."

"A lot of a brat," Oliver corrects.

"An entitled-as-hell brat," Rhett adds.

"Can't say I regret it, though," Elliot says as his gaze moves from me to Oliver and Rhett. "I couldn't've made it through high school without you two."

"Oh, we know," Oliver says with a wink.

“Wait,” I say slowly. “You threatened emancipation when you were fourteen because she didn’t want you to be friends with Oliver and Rhett?”

Elliot nods.

“But she still treats you like you’ll eventually see sense and want to leave them fourteen years later?”

“Yup.”

“She’s the type of mother who thinks no one is good enough for her son. Except her, that is.” Oliver rolls his eyes.

“It’s gross,” Rhett says darkly.

“And I don’t know, maybe she’s right.” Oliver shrugs. “But Elliot chose us.”

“And I’d do it a thousand times over,” Elliot says as he steps up to Oliver and frames his face with his hands. “I’ll always choose you three. You aren’t mistakes. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.” Turning to Rhett, Elliot takes his hand. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why she thought she could say all that shit.”

“You think we aren’t used to it?” Rhett says with a raised eyebrow. “I mean, she’s never said the quiet part out loud like that. At least, not to me and O. But c’mon, Ell, we’ve all known how she felt for years.”

“But you don’t deserve it.”

“Yeah, no shit. Which is why you kicked her out.” Rhett pulls Elliot into a firm embrace. “We’re good. This wasn’t your fault.”

The oven timer goes off, and Elliot pulls back. “The lasagna. I completely forgot.” After a quick kiss, Elliot leaves Rhett’s arms and rushes to the kitchen.

When I move to follow, Oliver grabs my arm. Now that Elliot is gone, he looks worried. “We have to figure out how to make this up to him.”

“I don’t think he’s that bothered,” Rhett replies. “I mean, he forgot, too.”

“I know, but it’s his *birthday.* We always do something nice.”

“Don’t you think we should let him decide what he wants to do?” I ask.

“I mean, yeah. I just don’t want him to feel unloved. He deserves better than that.”

“We’ll ask him,” Rhett says. “Now, come on. We need to get to the kitchen before he gets suspicious.”

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Chapter Nine

Elliot

By the time I've pulled the lasagna out of the oven, everyone has made their way into the kitchen. Oliver looks a little guilty, which is exactly what I was afraid of. I don't care that we all forgot. As Oliver said, we've been focused on other things that are way more important.

"I'm not upset," I tell them. "Really."

"We know." Tugging the knife from my hand, Rhett kisses my forehead. "Sit down. I'll take it from here."

"We still want to celebrate," Oliver tells me as I slump into the chair next to Wren. "Even if it's a little late."

"That could be nice." Sliding my hand over Wren's on the table, I do my best to relax. Seeing my parents always throws me into a funk, and celebrating seems like the perfect distraction.

"Is there anything you'd like to do?" Oliver asks.

"Hmm." I narrow my eyes and tap my chin, pretending to think on it. In truth, I've known what I want to do on my birthday for weeks. It's been hard to wait, but tonight will make it worth it.

“I’m happy to give you ideas,” Oliver says.

With a chuckle, I shake my head. “No ideas needed. Rhett, remember what you suggested to me in Finn’s cabin? Right after the Williams job?”

Hunger sparks in his eyes, but he crosses his arms and leans against the counter to disguise his excitement. “Remind me.”

Pointing between Oliver and Wren, I say, “Tie them up and tease the hell out of them. See which one breaks first.”

Wren groans and sinks into her chair. “You’re gonna kill me.”

I lean over and kiss the tip of her nose. “Only in the best way.”

With a smirk, Rhett says, “I wouldn’t mind seeing you make her cry.”

“RHETT!” Wren turns in her chair to glare at him.

“What?” As he shrugs, his smile widens. “You look so pretty with tears streaming down your face.”

“I’m not making her cry,” I say. “Although tears are still an option.”

When Wren’s eyes go wide, Oliver snickers.

“Careful, Ol,” I taunt. “Tears are still up in the air for you.”

“Who said I was against the idea?”

I grin. Who cares that we all forgot about my birthday? Tonight will make up for it.

Once the lasagna is cool enough to cut, we eat quickly. I enjoy watching Wren’s squirms out of the corner of my eye, and I think Rhett and Oliver do, too.

By the time we’ve cleared our plates, I’ve been able to process some of the argument we had with my parents. I don’t care about what they think—for the most part, at least. But when my mom started going after Rhett about his dad, I lost it. It wasn’t fair to him, nor was it even true.

“For the record,” I say as we gather up the dishes, “Rhett’s dad didn’t kick him out.”

Rhett shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” I tell him. “You didn’t do anything wrong. And if you did, it was only ever in reaction to his abuse.”

Wren’s gaze softens as she places a hand on Rhett’s arm. “I didn’t know you back then, and I still don’t know everything Richard did to you, but no one deserves to go through what he did to you. I’m glad you were able to get away from him. You don’t owe him an ounce of gratitude. You don’t owe him *anything.”*

“Thank you, sweetheart.” Dipping his head down, Rhett kisses her. “But that’s not what I want us focusing on right now. We’ve got a birthday to celebrate. Where do you want us, Ell?”

“The living room,” I answer without hesitation.

They all give me confused glances but don’t question me. I’m sure they were expecting me to want to head to one of the bedrooms. Maybe we’ll end up there, but for this first part, the living room has the perfect setup for what I’ve envisioned.

Once I’ve retrieved some ropes from my room, I’m met with three curious and eager expressions. “I’ll start with you,” I tell Wren.

She stands from where she was sitting next to Rhett on the couch. An involuntary smile takes over her face as she steps up to me. “What do you need me to do?”

“For now, let’s get you undressed.” Setting the ropes on the coffee table, I run my fingers down her arms with a feather-light touch. “And as we go . . . whatever I ask.”

She moves to unbutton her pants, but I grab her wrists.

“Let me.” I hook my fingers into her belt loops and tug her body into mine. She’s warm and soft, and her light floral scent is almost as addictive as the small whimper that spills from her lips.

Lifting her shirt, I pull it over her head and toss it on the floor. When I undo her pants, she tries to push them down her thighs, but I bat her hands away and do it myself. I take my time, leaving a trail of kisses behind as I do. By the time the fabric hits the floor and she steps out of them, she’s squirming with desire.

Only when I stand do I realize she’s twisting her hands together in an effort to not touch herself. “Such a good girl. Keep those hands away from yourself, and maybe I’ll give you a reward.”

Wren swallows audibly as I move closer. I caress her neck by brushing the backs of my fingers up her throat until they’re lifting her chin. When our gazes lock, her eyes drop to my lips, and her own part in anticipation of a kiss.

The whole idea is to tease them—to not give them what they want until it’s absolutely unbearable—but I can’t resist. I lean down and capture her mouth with my own. Her hands grasp the front of my shirt as her lips move against mine, and she moans when I slip my tongue into her mouth. My only thought is of how she’ll sound when she does that with her lips around my cock instead.

When I break off the kiss, Wren angles her face toward mine for more, but I shake my head. Her little sigh of disappointment has me smirking. Maybe it was a good idea to give her a small taste of what she can’t have until I say so. The more wound up she is, the better.

Reaching around her, I unclasp her bra and push the straps off her shoulders. It falls to the floor between us, and I nudge it out of the way with

my foot.

“I’m going to tie your arms behind your back. How does that sound?”

“Oh, yes please,” she says as she eagerly clasps her hands behind her.

“Not quite like that, love.” I turn her so she’s facing Oliver and Rhett instead of me. Gently, I bend her arms so the insides of her wrists are touching each other, and her fingertips just reach the insides of her elbows. “Perfect. Stay like that.”

I grab some rope from the coffee table. As I start tying her arms together, she relaxes into my touch with a sigh. She does something like that most times I tie her up.

The feeling is one I’m familiar with. There’s something about being restrained that, at least when I’m with Rhett, makes my mind go blank. My worries disappear because there isn’t a thing I can do about them in the moment. I love that I can provide something similar for Wren and Oliver.

Having another person under my command can do the same for me. Even when everything feels out of my control, I’ll always have this. It’s the one part of our lives that’s a constant safe haven. We can surrender ourselves to someone else when we need to let go, or we can take the power that’s handed to us when we need to feel in control.

There’s a balance, of course. I never want to go too far or let my emotions override the parts of me that make sure whatever we’re doing is safe. The last thing I want is to hurt one of them because I get too lost in my own desires and needs.

I finish binding Wren’s arms and move on to completing the tie with a star harness. As I go, I slip two fingers underneath the lines to make sure nothing is too tight.

Oliver groans. When I glance toward him, he's watching with a greedy expression.

"You're next, Ol," I say. "No worries."

Once I'm done with Wren, I step back to admire my work. She adjusts, wiggling and stepping from foot to foot.

"Does it feel all right?" I ask.

"It feels perfect."

"Good." With a kiss to her stomach, I slide her panties down and help her step out of them. "I'll come back to you in a minute."

At that, Oliver straightens. When I grab more rope and head his way, he immediately puts his arms behind him in the way I positioned Wren.

I shake my head. "You're gonna need your hands in front of you tonight. But touch your cock, and you'll get spanked. Hard."

"But Ell," he protests as I pull his shirt over his head.

"You can be a good boy for me, Ol. I know you can."

"Yeah, but you're not gonna make it easy."

With a deep chuckle, I exchange a smirk with Rhett. "No, no I'm not. You'll have to suffer."

With a groan, Oliver drops his head back. I take the opportunity to kiss his neck while I hold his hands firmly in mine. He leans into my mouth with a shudder, and when I pull back, he swears under his breath.

Once I've finished tying his wrists, I double-check that nothing is too tight. There's some leftover rope leading off the cuffs that acts as a lead. I have a feeling Rhett will like that.

I undo the button of Oliver's pants and slowly slide down the zipper. He's practically bouncing with excitement, which makes it a little difficult to get

his clothes off him, but I manage. I pull his briefs down, and his dick springs upward, hard and begging to be touched.

As I lead him over to Rhett, he manages to sneak in a slow stroke of his cock. I smack his ass, not bothering to hold back.

“OWWWWW!”

Arching a brow, Rhett takes Oliver’s hands and holds them away from his body. “Don’t know why you’re acting surprised. He did exactly what he said he would.”

As I take off my shirt, Wren giggles behind us.

“You laugh now, princess,” Oliver says. “But just you wait.”

“How’s this gonna go, Ell?” Rhett asks me.

“For now, I’ll work on Wren, and you work on O. Don’t touch yourself, and don’t touch his dick. No one comes without my permission, and anything I tell you to do, you do immediately.”

Oliver shoots me a pouty glare, but beneath it is a giddy delight that he’s barely containing. “Can I touch Rhett’s dick?”

“Why do you think your hands are in front of you? But remember—he’s not allowed to come. And you’re not allowed to do anything unless he tells you to.”

At that, Rhett tugs on the extra rope from Oliver’s wrists. His eyes darken as Oliver has no choice but to follow him to the couch and sit next to him.

Turning my attention to Wren, I find her waiting for me patiently. A smile blooms on her face as I step closer, and I reward her with a slow, languid kiss. She licks into my mouth with an eager moan, and I grasp her hips as I suck on her tongue.

“God,” Oliver groans.

“Be good,” Rhett says, “and maybe I’ll kiss you like that.”

When I break off our kiss, I take great pleasure in how long it takes Wren to open her eyes again. She smiles up at me in an almost dazed manner.

“Come here, love.” I guide her to an armchair that’s across from the couch. Once I’m sitting, I help her settle onto my lap. Her back is to me, so she’s facing Oliver and Rhett, who can’t take their eyes off us.

“Oh,” Wren whispers as she realizes they’re both watching us with rapt, hungry attention.

I drape Wren’s legs over mine, so when I push them apart, she’s spread wide and on display. It vaguely reminds me of our first night together when Oliver and Rhett watched while I fingered her. Except this time, Rhett will be working on Oliver, too.

“Lean back,” I tell Wren, my voice soothing. I flatten a palm against her chest and push her backward.

The rope rubs against my skin, and with Wren’s arms tied behind her, she has to arch her back a little. There’s nothing she can do but helplessly grind her ass against my erection, which doesn’t help with my wavering patience.

Trying to hold myself over, I squeeze her breasts. Her moans join my own as I trace my thumbs around her nipples but don’t quite touch them.

“Fuck,” Oliver mutters. “She’s dripping.”

Reaching in between Wren’s legs, I gently swipe up some of her arousal onto my fingers. I barely touch her, but she still jumps and whimpers. *Good.* I want her so sensitive that even the lightest touch is overwhelming.

When I spread her arousal over her lips, she gasps. The action makes both Oliver and Rhett groan, and pride unfurls in my chest at their lustful stares. This is *exactly* what I was hoping for.

“Oliver,” I say. “Come here.”

He jumps up immediately. Once he’s standing in front of us, he glances toward me questioningly, waiting for instruction. It makes me smile. I love when he waits without being told to.

“Would you like to kiss her?” I ask.

“Yes,” Oliver groans. “Oh, yes please.”

“Go ahead.”

Before he does, Oliver steps to the side. Wren has to turn to look at him, and it gives me a better view as he leans in and brushes his lips against hers. She waits patiently, watching him with hooded eyes, until he murmurs, “So beautiful,” and kisses her.

They start off slow, savoring the attention and passion coming from the other. Then, with a groan, Oliver grabs Wren’s face. He angles it upward, and when she parts her lips, his tongue slides inside. All she can do is arch into him and make little noises of pleasure.

While I watch them, I let my fingers explore Wren’s body. I don’t touch anywhere that’s too sensitive. The goal is to drive her out of her mind with need, which I plan on drawing out much more the next chance I get to be alone with her. I’d do it today, but I know Oliver can’t last that long.

“That’s enough,” I say after letting them go for longer than I should. “O, back to Rhett.”

Reluctantly, Oliver releases Wren, who’s already turned into a panting mess. She licks her lips as she watches him sit on the couch and drape his legs over Rhett’s.

As I go back to squeezing Wren’s breasts, Rhett’s hands skate up Oliver’s legs, massaging as he goes. When he reaches the tops of his thighs, he lightly traces his fingers over Oliver’s hips.

“FUCK. You know I’m ticklish there, you asshole!” Oliver tries to shove Rhett away but quickly finds himself pinned down on the couch with his hands above his head. “Goddammit.”

I laugh before leaning down and kissing Wren’s shoulder. She moans and rolls her ass into my erection. I’ve kept my hands on her breasts, but I haven’t even come close to touching her nipples.

“Does this count as you paying me back tenfold?” she asks.

I chuckle darkly. “Oh, not even close, love. Not even close.”

Wren groans in protest, but I can hear her smile. She likes this—being teased and edged and used for our pleasure. I wouldn’t do it if she didn’t.

“Watch them,” I command lowly in Wren’s ear, knowing it’ll only turn her on more.

She turns her attention back to the guys. Rhett has Oliver completely pinned down, and he’s using his free hand to trace a delicate pattern all over Oliver’s torso. His fingers get dangerously close to Oliver’s cock, but never close enough. It makes Oliver squirm and groan and beg.

“Just one touch,” he gasps. “Fuck, please, Ell. Please let him.”

“Not yet,” I say as I brush my hands over Wren’s stomach. “You have to earn your pleasure tonight.”

Oliver mutters something under his breath bitterly before glaring at the ceiling.

“What was that?” I ask.

“N-nothing.”

Rhett straightens. “Uh uh. Tell him what you said.”

Laughing nervously, Oliver turns his head so he can look at me. “I said that I love you so much, and I’ll happily do whatever you want.”

With a growl, Rhett flips Oliver over so he's on his stomach. The sharp *smack* from Rhett spanking him echoes loudly in the room.

"HEYYYYY."

"Go ahead," Rhett says as he massages the spot he just hit. "Lie again, I dare you."

Oliver groans. "I said I'll get you back for this."

I hum before pinching Wren's nipples between my fingers. She has exactly the reaction I was hoping for, which is a gasp that turns into a quiet moan.

Jealousy flashes in Oliver's eyes. "That's not fair."

"What did we tell you the other day?" I ask. "Good girls get rewarded, and so do good boys. Wren's been perfectly good."

"And you promised Ell you'd be good for his birthday, didn't you?" Rhett says.

"Fuck. I did."

"Then *be good,"* Rhett says gruffly, "or you'll pay for it."

"I will be," Oliver shouts when Rhett removes his hand. He wasn't going to spank him again, but Oliver doesn't know that.

"That's much better." Rhett crawls off him. "I knew you had it in you."

I let my hands fall from Wren's breasts to the tops of her thighs. Her skin is extra soft there, and I trace it lightly. I love every inch of her body, but there's something about her thighs that makes me wild.

"Your body was made in heaven," I murmur in her ear. "Made specifically for us. You know that?"

She moans as I get closer to the apex of her thighs without touching where she desperately needs me to. "Does that mean you were made for me?"

“We were all made for each other. Weren’t we, Oliver?”

“There’s no other explanation,” he says without a second’s hesitation. “Everything about our pasts says we never should’ve even crossed paths. But look at us. Look at all we’ve overcome. It’s fate.”

“What do you think about that?” I whisper as I trace the outside of Wren’s vulva. “A match made by the fates themselves.”

She has to catch her breath before she can respond. “I don’t know what I believe. Maybe it’s put us together, maybe not. But if it hasn’t, we’re making our own fate.” She does her best to lean to the side and twist so she can look at me. “By choosing each other.”

“Always,” I whisper.

When her lips meet mine, she sighs into my mouth. I grip her chin and keep her there until Rhett’s groaning draws our attention away from each other.

Rhett’s clothes are discarded on the floor, and he’s sitting on the couch while Oliver kneels on the floor in between his legs. One of his hands rests on Oliver’s head, guiding him, while the other holds the spare rope to make sure Oliver behaves. Rhett groans again as Oliver sucks his cock.

“Ell,” Wren moans. “I wanna do that.”

“Do what? Suck Rhett’s dick?”

“I don’t care whose. Just one of you. Please, Ell?”

“Such a bad girl,” I taunt. “She doesn’t even care whose cock she gets.”

Groaning, Wren squirms against me. “Please?”

“Maybe they should team up,” Rhett says. “Suck the birthday boy’s dick together.”

“Oh, *please,”* Wren groans.

Oliver raises his head, releasing Rhett's dick with a *pop*. "Whatever Ell wants, I'll do."

"Then get over here," I say as I help Wren up. While she's still facing the guys, I squeeze her ass. "And both of you get on your knees."

As they move to get into position, I slip my clothes off and settle back in the chair. I relax, surveying them both. They're kneeling next to each other and watching me expectantly. Rhett stands to one side, his arms crossed as he stares down at them. His dick is rock hard, and just the sight of it makes my mouth water.

"I knew you could be good," I tell Oliver. "Go ahead."

They seem to be able to communicate with a single glance, because both Wren and Oliver lean in and slowly lick my cock from base to tip. When they reach the top, Oliver strokes his tongue across Wren's before moving back down my dick. She doesn't follow, sucking on the head instead. Their faces bump as Oliver makes his way up again, but they figure out how to work together quickly.

"Fuck," I groan. The sensations are enough to make me lose my breath, and that's not even accounting for what it's like to have them both focused on me like this. If I have my way, this is going to become a regular thing.

Wren and Oliver continue working on me in tandem. I beckon for Rhett to come closer to me, grabbing on to him and yanking him down once he does. His mouth is hot against mine as I kiss him fervently.

"Enjoying yourself, pretty boy?" He bites my bottom lip.

I groan. "Fuck, Wren, keep sucking just like that."

"Careful," Rhett chides as he pushes my chin up. "You don't want to finish this early on, do you?"

All I manage is a breathless moan when Rhett lowers his head. As he sucks on my neck, probably adding another hickey next to Oliver's, I wish I could let go. But I've learned over the years that I like waiting. I like the buildup of lust and tension that comes from focusing on others instead of myself. It's hard to remember that in the moment, but it's always worth it.

"I won't," I say, my voice thick. Even I don't believe myself entirely.

Oliver leans back as Wren takes as much of my dick as she can. It hits the back of her throat, and I can feel her trying not to choke. She comes back up for air, but it only lasts for a second before she's sucking on my cock again.

"Fuck," Oliver whispers as he watches with a greedy expression.

Slowly, Wren moves up and down my cock, taking more every time. While she does it, she strokes my dick with her tongue, and it rips a groan from my throat.

"Such a good girl," Rhett says as he crouches next to her. "Keep sucking his cock like that, and maybe he'll go easy on you."

"Not a chance," I say half-heartedly.

That doesn't deter Wren, though. She keeps going, moaning as she does. *Fuck,* it feels good. Even when she comes up to give her jaw a break, she keeps licking the underside of my cock.

"Just can't get enough, can you?" I stroke the top of her head.

Again, she tries to take more of my dick, but she ends up gagging enough that she has to sit back and catch her breath. Oliver takes the opportunity to drag his tongue up my cock. He swirls it around the tip while making eye contact with me, and then he sucks gently while stroking with one of his hands.

Wren doesn’t take her eyes off Oliver and me for a split second. She watches, entranced, as I thrust upward into Oliver’s mouth. I’m at a point where I just can’t stay still anymore.

“No hands,” I tell Oliver as I grab a fistful of his hair.

Immediately, Oliver drops them and continues sucking. It feels good enough that I know I need to stop soon, but I can’t yet. Not when he’s got that greedy look in his eyes that I can never quite resist.

Oliver dips his head down as I thrust into his mouth again, and we both moan. Rhett is watching Wren, who’s still watching us, and it only makes everything feel ten times better.

“You’re dripping onto the floor, sweetheart.”

With a gasp, Wren tries to squeeze her thighs together, but Rhett yanks them apart.

“Let it happen. Show us how much of a filthy, needy slut you are for Elliot’s cock.”

Fuck, I can’t last like this.

I thrust into Oliver’s mouth one more time before releasing him. Of course, he tries for more, but he stops when I shake my head.

“Take him back to the couch,” I instruct Rhett. “And Wren, back up on my lap.”

Rhett stays standing and pushes Oliver onto his knees. Immediately, Oliver uses both hands to stroke Rhett’s dick.

“Slowly,” I tell him. “Remember, he doesn’t get to come yet, either.”

“Oh, I won’t forget,” Oliver says.

I go back to teasing Wren, reveling in the softness of her skin and the way she shudders against me.

“More,” she moans. “This is torture.”

“More of what?” I whisper in her ear. Finally, I brush the pads of my thumbs over her hard nipples. “This?”

She throws her head back until it hits my shoulder. “*Ooohhhh*, yes.”

Rhett and I share a smirk as I drop one of my hands in between Wren’s legs. I’ll give her what she wants—for now.

When I lightly trace my fingers around the outside of Wren’s vulva, her whimper fills the room. Oliver’s eyes latch onto the movement of my hand, and his own slow to a halt.

“Did I tell you to stop?” Rhett asks gruffly. He grabs a handful of Oliver’s hair and forces him to look up.

“She’s just so pretty,” Oliver whines. “And so wet. Please, just give me one minute with her. Or even one lick. That kiss wasn’t enough—I need more.”

“Not yet,” I say. “For now, focus on Rhett.”

He pouts. “Can’t I do both?”

“Not yet,” I repeat. “Now either get those hands moving again or shut up and suck Rhett’s dick.”

Just as I figured he would, Oliver chooses the latter. Rhett’s eyes fall closed as Oliver takes his cock into his mouth. The grip Rhett has on Oliver’s hair doesn’t loosen. In fact, I think he tightens it.

My finger finally slides over Wren’s clit, and she gasps. Tension winds through her body as I stroke in tiny, light circles.

“You like what you see?” I murmur. “You like how badly Oliver wants you both? If I didn’t choose for him, he wouldn’t know what to do.”

“Mmhmm,” she replies, and I can hear the smile in her voice.

We watch Oliver and Rhett as I continue to finger her lightly. It’s not enough to get her anywhere for a long time, but it gives her some measure

of relief for the moment.

Rhett lets Oliver suck his cock for a few minutes, but then he steps back and smirks at Oliver's protests. Crouching in front of him, Rhett takes his jaw in between two fingers and kisses him. Oliver groans and tries to grab at one of Rhett's arms to keep him in place.

The sight sends a wave of heat through me. Wren's breath hitches, and I realize my finger started moving faster on its own.

"Ell," Wren chokes out.

Shit. She's more worked up than I thought she was.

After one more stroke of my finger, I pull my hand away. The mounting tension in Wren's body dissolves.

"No," she whimpers. "I was so close."

I brush my finger over her clit again, keeping my touch feather-light. "Not yet."

"Elliot, please. I need you inside of me."

"I'm not fucking you," I tell her, my voice warm with a hint of laughter.

The noise of frustration that leaves her throat has my smile deepening. "My mouth, then. *Please."*

"You want me to stop?" I taunt softly. "I thought you wanted to come."

She huffs. "Like you'd let me."

"Fair point."

"Well, I can't wait anymore," Oliver says. "It's been long enough."

I hide my snicker by burying my face in Wren's neck. From the start, I knew Oliver wouldn't be able to last long. He's always been impatient.

Rhett looks to me questioningly, and I give him a nod.

"Looks like you're getting your way." Rhett pulls Oliver to his feet before kissing him deeply enough that Oliver's knees go weak.

As Oliver and Rhett settle next to each other on the couch, I help Wren off my lap. I stand, and she drops to her knees in front of me.

“Goddamn,” Oliver groans.

I lift my gaze just in time to watch Rhett grab the spare rope from Oliver’s cuffs and pull it up and back. It renders Oliver helpless with his elbows up in the air and his hands stuck behind his neck. He whimpers when Rhett wraps his other hand around Oliver’s cock.

“Stay still,” Rhett tells him soothingly, “and don’t take your eyes off them.”

At that, I look back to Wren. She’s sitting perfectly still and staring longingly at my cock. Her lips are slightly parted, and an insatiable hunger gleams in her eyes.

“Always so patient,” I murmur, stroking my fingers down her jawbone. “You ready?”

In response, she nods and opens wider, so I slide my dick into her mouth. Instantly, she runs her tongue along the underside, so I push in deeper. I don’t go all the way in yet, just in case she reaches a certain point and changes her mind.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” Oliver pants.

After fucking Wren’s mouth shallowly for a minute, I pull out. She whines and stretches toward me, which I take as a good sign.

“You still want more, love?”

“Give me all of it,” she whispers.

Oh, Christ.

This time, when I fuck into her mouth, she adjusts so she can take me deeper. When I hit the back of her throat, I hold her head and press forward

until I’m seated as deeply as I can go. I pull back an inch before sliding all the way in again, groaning as I do.

Wren gags and her eyes water, so I ease out of her. Tears drip onto her cheeks as she coughs and heaves in air.

“Too much?” I ask.

Shaking her head, she gets back into position. “Again.”

“You’re gonna make me come,” Oliver pants. “She’s too sexy like that.”

“Uh uh, no.” Rhett’s hand stills on Oliver’s cock. “You’re not coming until Elliot says you can.”

“Fuuuuuck.” Oliver thrusts into Rhett’s hand. “Can’t stop.”

Clicking his tongue, Rhett removes his hand entirely. “We already told you, bad boys get punished. Is that what you want right now?”

“No,” he groans. “I want to come.”

I let out an amused breath that devolves into a groan when Wren starts sucking my cock. “Can’t help yourself, can you?” I look between her and Oliver. “Either of you.”

Wren responds by moving her head more enthusiastically. I choke on my next breath and push some hair out of her face.

“Too good at this,” I mutter.

“Rhett,” Oliver begs. “I can’t stand this.”

“You can take it.” Rhett leans in and kisses Oliver possessively.

“Let him go,” I say. “But *don’t* touch yourself, Ol.”

He groans but does as I say when Rhett releases the rope. Oliver rolls his shoulders, watching with a ravenous expression as Wren continues working up and down my cock.

I take some of her hair in my hand and gently pull her back. There’s something I want to watch all three of them do, but it’ll be easier upstairs.

“We need to move to my bedroom,” I say as I lift Wren to her feet.

“For what?” she asks.

“You’ll see.” I lead her out of the room, followed closely by Rhett and Ol. Upstairs, I grab Oliver’s rope and tug him toward the bed. “Sit against the headboard. That’s it. Now Wren, get on top of him.” I help her to make sure she doesn’t fall over.

With his hands tied, it’s a little awkward for Oliver to guide his dick into Wren as she lowers herself onto him, but they make it work. I split my attention between the two of them, not wanting to miss a single thing.

“Now ride him,” I tell Wren. “Ride him until you come.”

Oliver cups Wren’s chin in between his tied hands and kisses her. She rolls her hips slowly, moaning and grinding against him.

I smack her ass. “Harder.”

Wren lets out a surprised cry but obeys. She begins moving up and down, which makes Oliver groan.

“Just like that, princess. God, I love watching you like this.”

Rhett and I don’t take our eyes off them for a single moment. Wren is fucking Oliver as hard as she can, and the sight draws us in. I don’t think either of us could look away even if we wanted to—which we definitely don’t.

After a few minutes, Wren’s breaths grow harsher, and her movements slow. Her chest is heaving, and a light layer of sweat covers her forehead.

I spank her again. “Did I tell you to slow down?”

“I—my legs are tired,” she pants. “I’m trying.”

I grab a bottle of lube and toss it to Rhett. “Show her how it’s done.”

Rhett pushes Wren as far forward into Oliver as she can go. She yelps into Oliver’s neck when Rhett squirts the lube onto her.

Rhett gives her an amused look. “You good?”

“It was colder than I expected,” she says, moaning when Rhett spreads the lube around and slides a finger into her ass. She kisses Oliver’s neck before relaxing and closing her eyes.

“That’s it,” Rhett murmurs as he adds another finger. “Kiss her, O.”

Turning his head, Oliver nudges Wren’s face until she’s at a better angle. Their lips meet in a sloppy but loving kiss.

As I watch, I stroke my dick slowly. Rhett finishes prepping Wren, and by the time he’s washed his hands and come back, Oliver and Wren haven’t pulled away yet.

“Ready, sweetheart?”

She nods breathlessly, so Rhett spreads her ass cheeks before sliding in an inch or two. Whimpering, Wren drops her head to Oliver’s shoulder.

I can’t help my smile as Rhett eases into Wren. He fucks her without much force, making sure she’s adjusted.

There’s nothing in the world I find hotter than this—the three people I love the most all together, doing whatever I ask of them. No questions, just trust and obedience.

“Rhett,” Oliver groans. “Harder, please.”

Rhett looks to me, and the second I nod, he slams into Wren. She screams into Oliver’s shoulder. As he fucks her, he wraps a hand around Wren’s throat and lowers his lips to her ear.

“You like this, sweetheart? You like it when we both fuck you together?”

“Yes,” she moans.

“You like that Elliot enjoys seeing you like this? Look how hard his cock is.” He grabs her chin and turns her head so she’s looking at me.

“Oh,” she whispers. Her eyes drift down my body, stopping on my hand, which is still wrapped around my cock.

I crawl onto the bed. “He’s right. I love watching them do whatever they want to you.” I kiss her, smiling against her mouth when she whimpers. “You’re nothing but a pretty toy for them to use, aren’t you?”

“And you,” she whispers, looking up at me with wide eyes.

My smile grows. “That’s right.”

This whole time, Rhett hasn’t slowed his thrusts. With her hands still tied behind her back, Wren can’t do anything but take it. She’s trapped and helpless, only able to take whatever we do to her.

My guess is that it won’t take much to make Wren come, so I reach between her and Oliver and lightly pinch one of her nipples. Her gasp dissolves into a moan as Rhett wraps his hand around her throat again.

“Who do you belong to, Wren?” he asks her. “Whose cocks are you a filthy whore for?”

“Yours,” she whispers.

I roll her nipple, adding enough pressure that her eyes fly open in surprise. “I didn’t hear you.”

“I—” She groans as Oliver sucks her other nipple into his mouth. Her eyes close again, and a telltale whimper falls from her lips.

“Say it,” I demand. “Say it now, Wren.”

“I belong to you,” she cries just as she comes.

“That’s right,” I murmur as she sobs out my name. “All ours.”

Watching her get lost in her orgasm is mesmerizing. As she comes down, I kiss her shoulder proudly.

“I’m gonna come,” Oliver moans.

Immediately, Rhett stops moving. “Not yet, you aren’t.”

“FUCK.” Oliver glares at him. “I’m so close. Please—”

“No,” I tell him. “Your orgasm is mine tonight.”

Oliver looks equally disappointed and excited as Rhett pulls out of Wren. She doesn’t resist as Rhett loops his arms around her and lifts her off Oliver. He sits on his ass with his legs crossed and sets her in his lap.

“Does that mean you’ll fuck me now?” Oliver asks, raising an eyebrow.

I don’t answer, instead straddling him and tracing a finger down his chest.

Oliver squirms. “Please let me come.”

“You can be patient.”

“You’re having too much fun,” he grumbles.

“That’s what birthdays are for.”

“Please? I’ll let you fuck me whenever you want.”

“You already let me fuck you whenever I want.”

“I’ll let you have the last bite of my ice cream every night for a month,” Oliver tries.

I let out a low hum. He’s quite protective of his ice cream. “You really that desperate?”

Oliver whines and tries to persuade me with pleading eyes. It only makes me laugh, especially when a pout forms on his features.

“All in due time,” I murmur as I stroke his hair. “But you want me to get what I want on my birthday, don’t you?”

He huffs. “Of course, I do.”

“Then you can wait for me. I know you can.”

“At least kiss me? Please?”

“Mmm, that I can do.” I capture his chin in between my thumb and forefinger. As I lean in closer, his eyes fill with need, and before my lips

even touch his, he groans in anticipation. I'm tempted to sit there, a mere inch from him, just to see what he'll do. But he deserves some sort of reward for being so patient, so I close the space between us.

Oliver's whimper goes straight to my dick. He stretches upward as my tongue enters his mouth and tangles with his. If his hands weren't restrained, I'm sure he'd be clinging to me in an effort to keep me from pulling away.

I wrap my hands around Oliver's dick and stroke. He gasps into my mouth even though I keep my movements frustratingly slow. When I nip at his bottom lip, he shudders.

"No," he groans when I finally lean back. "Ell, more. Please."

"You can wait. For now, watch."

Rhett has moved Wren so she's on her knees with her head on the mattress. She moans into the blankets as he fucks her with hard, even strokes from behind.

"Why can't you do that to me?" Oliver gives me a playful pout.

I sigh. "You never were one for patience, were you?"

After I find where Rhett put the lube, I prep Oliver while he watches Wren. I take a minute to wash my hands, and when I come back, I reposition Oliver so he's lying on his back parallel to her.

When I come up beside Rhett, he pauses with his hands on her hips. "Kiss me, pretty boy."

He doesn't have to tell me twice. Leaning over, I brush my lips against his. Rhett grabs a handful of my hair, and immediately, the kiss turns fierce. I groan into his mouth until Oliver nudges me with his leg.

"You two can kiss later. It's my turn now."

Rhett lets me go and shoots Oliver a look. “I wouldn’t get too demanding if I were you. You’re not the one in charge here.”

Oliver grins. “Yeah, but I’m gonna get what I want anyway.”

Rhett rolls his eyes, sliding in and out of Wren slowly. She whimpers into the blankets, meeting each of his thrusts with her own.

I turn my attention back to Oliver. Guiding my lubed-up cock into him, I slowly press forward.

“Finally,” Oliver moans. “God, you made me wait too long for this.”

“Did I? I think I waited the perfect amount of time.”

Based on Oliver’s expression, he’s about to give me a snarky response, but then Wren screams beside us.

When I glance over, I see that Rhett’s picked up his pace. He has a firm grip on Wren’s hips, and every time he pounds into her, he pulls her into him.

“This is what you want, isn’t it?” he taunts. “You want to be fucked like a toy and filled to the brim with cum, don’t you, my beautiful whore?”

“Yes,” she cries into the mattress.

Oliver moans, and I realize I started fucking him without making a conscious decision to do so. When I turn my attention back to him, I watch as my cock disappears inside of him.

“I love this,” I groan. “I love watching you take every inch of my cock.”

“Give it to me,” Oliver pants. “Give me everything you’ve got.”

And I do. Holding his legs, I fuck Oliver like I’ll die if I stop. I deprived him for his own pleasure, and now it’s time to deliver.

Oliver’s moans and whimpers join Wren’s, and I take in the sight of the four of us together like this. Anyone who thinks we aren’t meant to be together is astronomically wrong.

We’re perfect for each other.

“You’re not a mistake.” I don’t even realize I’ve said the words until Oliver reaches out and brushes his fingers over my stomach.

“Ell, you don’t have to tell me, I—”

“And I’ll always choose you,” I say. “You know that, right?”

“Of course I do, Ell.” He tries to sit up and kiss me, but I grab his chin and force him to stay still and look at me.

“You’re not a mistake,” I repeat firmly. “You mean everything to me.”

“I know,” Oliver says gently. “You don’t—”

“No. I shouldn’t’ve let her go on for so long. I should’ve kicked her out sooner.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself,” he pants.

“I’m not.” I haven’t stopped fucking him the entire time, too caught up to slow down. But I need him to know. I need all of them to understand.

“Elliot—”

“I’ll.” *Thrust.* “Always.” *Thrust.* “Choose.” *Thrust.* “You.”

I wrap my hand around Oliver’s cock and stroke. His breath hitches, and he tries to say something, but then I add more force to my thrusts, and his eyes roll into the back of his head.

“Ell,” he manages to get out on something halfway between a moan and a whine.

“I love you.” I look from Oliver to Wren, making sure they both hear me. When I meet Rhett’s gaze, I add, “All of you.”

His hips snap forward one more time before he slows. With a breathless groan, he leans over Wren and buries his face in her hair as he comes.

Oliver finishes next, his cum coating his stomach and chest. The sight pushes me over the edge, and I lose myself in the mind-numbing sensations.

I have to catch myself to stop from falling and crushing Oliver. A groan escapes my lips as I carefully lean down and kiss him.

He grins as he looks up at me. “Was the birthday sex everything you wanted?”

“Almost.” My gaze falls on Wren. “But we’re not quite done yet.”

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Chapter Ten

Wren

Elliot’s eyes are filled with an insatiable lust that takes my breath away. As he moves closer, Rhett slowly pulls out of me with a tired groan and gets off the bed.

“M-more?” I don’t hide my surprise. I thought Elliot would at least want a break, but apparently not.

Gently, he lifts me to my knees and begins untying me. He’s careful with the ropes, making sure none of them accidentally smack me.

“There’s one more thing I want from you.”

The way he says it sends a shiver up my spine. I look between Rhett and Oliver, but neither of their expressions give anything away. In fact, they look just as intrigued as I am.

Once Elliot has finished removing the ropes, he takes a minute to massage my shoulders and arms. His lips feather along my hairline as I relax into him.

“What do you want me to do?” I ask.

Elliot is behind me, so I can't see his smirk, but I hear it as he says, "You'll see."

The mattress shifts as Rhett crawls onto the mattress with a couple wet washcloths. Oliver is resting on the bed with his hands above his head. Rhett smirks at the spare rope coming off Oliver's cuffs before taking it into his hand.

"I think we should tie you up like this more often," he tells Oliver as he gently wipes at his chest. "I like being able to pull you around to wherever I want you."

When Elliot reaches around me, his fingers skirt down my body before he reaches in between my legs. I gasp. I was sure I was too tired to come again, but it's like my body reawakens under his touch. When his finger brushes against my clit, electricity shoots through me, and I tip my head back with a groan.

"I knew you could take more." Elliot's voice is low in my ear before he kisses my neck.

I grind against his hand in response. I'm not sure what he's doing—or, I suppose, why he's doing this now. Elliot already fingered me, and he already came, so I don't know what exactly he wants.

"Just relax," he whispers.

Right before I slow my movements, I realize Oliver is watching us with a sated smile. Rhett is in the bathroom washing the cloths, but when he comes back, his gaze is glued to us as well.

Pressure builds low in my stomach, and my muscles pull tight as Elliot circles my clit. His free arm loops around me, keeping me in place as he builds the tension higher and higher.

“Look at her,” Oliver murmurs as Rhett steps closer to the bed. “She’s shaking.”

“Such a needy slut, aren’t you?” Elliot asks.

Apparently that’s all it takes. I let out a surprised cry as my orgasm slams into me, drowning me in a wave of pleasure.

Elliot slips his fingers inside of me and curls them against my walls, almost forcing my body to surrender to him. I cover my face with my hands as I gush around his fingers.

“Elliot,” I cry. I don’t think I could hold back even if I wanted to.

“Oh, that’s it,” he praises as he adds more pressure. “Squirt all over my fingers. Such a good girl, Wren.”

Something like a sob leaves my throat as I give in. *Fuck*—it feels so good, but I don’t understand how he’s not grossed out.

Rhett grabs my hands and yanks them away from me. “Open your eyes. *Now,* sweetheart.”

With a gasp, I do. “Rhett—”

“Look at me.”

Grudgingly, I force myself to meet Rhett’s gaze. It’s only for a second before I can’t take it anymore and look away sheepishly.

“Does he look disgusted?” Rhett asks.

I can’t really see Elliot’s face, but when I turn to get a look, he smiles at me. “N-no.”

“Do I? Does O?”

“No,” I mumble.

Rhett lowers his head. “Then you’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. Yeah?”

Before I can respond, Rhett's lips meet mine in a slow and gentle kiss. It's reassuring—loving, even—although I don't think he's ready to label it as such. It's how I feel, though, so I moan and grab his face so he can't pull away.

By now, Elliot's hand has slowed to a stop. I'd imagine that while everything down there is still wet, it's not very slippery anymore.

Elliot nudges my face with his nose. "Love."

"Hmm?"

He grabs my chin with his clean hand and forces me to meet his gaze. "Are you embarrassed?"

"I, um . . ." The intensity in his eyes is too much, so I squeeze mine shut.

"You don't have to be, Wren. Not with us."

I squirm. "You really don't . . . you really don't care?"

"Not at all." He kisses me. "Like I said last time, I think it's hot."

"And the blankets?"

"We'll wash them."

"And you're *really* not grossed out?"

"Not. at. all." To my surprise, he smiles bashfully. "I like that I can make you squirt like that."

Slowly, my embarrassment fades, and I turn so I can kiss Elliot properly.

Sometimes, I forget that I'm safe with them. I can be exactly who I am—brave or scared, strong or weak, awkward or confident. Their acceptance and care for me will never fade.

I wrap my arms around him, thanking the fates or the universe or whatever is out there for placing me in the arms of these three men. I never want to be anywhere else. And, thankfully, I'll never have to be.

. . .

After we all clean up, I check my phone and realize I have multiple missed calls from my mom. I almost ignore them, but if she tried to contact me more than once, it's possibly about something important.

After telling the guys I'll only be a few minutes, I slip into the library and settle on a window seat. I've barely talked to my mom since her attempted intervention, and I really *don't* want to talk to her now.

Oh, come on, Wren. You can handle her. It's not like she's here.

Still, I find myself scrolling up in my contacts list until my thumb is hovering over Ava's name instead of my mom's. It's been too long since we've talked—I just haven't had any time. And how the hell am I supposed to explain that I'm dating three hitmen, plotting the downfall of one of the most powerful men in the city, and I got kidnapped? Oh, and the time she *thinks* I got kidnapped that I was actually getting railed in a cabin in the woods?

I sigh. Even if I *could* tell Ava, this isn't the time. I just need to check in with her and give her as much of an update as I can. She deserves more, but this is the best I can do.

Wren: Hey. I know it's been a while, and I'm sorry I haven't reached out.

I'm in the process of writing a second message when multiple texts come through.

Ava: GIRL!!! You literally dropped off the face of the earth. What's going on?!

Ava: I was beginning to think those three guys kidnapped and murdered you or something.

Ava: I’m SO glad you’re okay. I miss you.

Wren: I miss you too.

I add a heart emoji, hoping that it conveys just how much I mean it. My focus has been elsewhere, but I haven’t forgotten about Ava. I just haven’t had the time or energy to come up with a way to explain my sudden absence.

Is this what it’s been like for the guys for the past decade?

The thought breaks my heart. I know they have Finn, but do they have many other friends? I imagine I would’ve at least heard about them by now if that’s the case, but who knows? Until today, I hadn’t met any of the guys’ parents, either.

A memory unfolds in the back of my mind—something about Elliot saying they closed their relationship because they didn’t have the energy or time to give to other partners. Maybe it *is* the same way with their friendships. There’s no denying that their revenge plans have overtaken their life in every way possible.

My phone buzzes in my hand.

Ava: Are you coming back to work soon?

I type out a vague reply before deleting it. Ava deserves as much of the truth as I can give her.

Wren: I’m quitting. I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you in person, and I know it’s out of the blue.

Ava: WHAT??? What’s going on? Are you sure everything is okay?

Wren: Everything’s fine, my life just took a couple unexpected turns. I promise I’ll see you as soon as I can and explain everything.

Ava: Is this because of the guys? Are they making you quit?

Wren: No! They’re supportive either way.

Ava: Okay. They didn't give shitbag vibes, but I wasn't sure.

Wren: Everything should calm down in a week or so, and then you and I can get together, okay?

Ava: All right. If you need anything, I'm just a text away, okay?

I send a heart emoji and then close out my messaging app. However much I want to, I need to get this conversation with my mom over with. My chest tightens as I finally press the call button. As I wait for her to pick up, I tap my fingers against my knee.

Please don't answer. Please don't answer. Please—

"Wren! *Finally*, you have some time to talk to your mother."

"I was busy. Do you need something?"

I'm not usually so blunt, but she lost her right to civility from me. Besides, I want to get back to the guys. Elliot suggested watching a movie before bed, and that sounds like a lovely way to end his birthday. I didn't want this call hanging over me all night, so they're waiting on me.

"Am I not allowed to call just to talk to my daughter?"

Maybe you shouldn't have that privilege. I bite my tongue before the words accidentally slip out. "I suppose."

As expected, Patricia scoffs. "You *suppose?* I'm your mother! Why is it so hard for you to give me a few minutes of your time here and there?"

"I don't want to talk about it right now." There's not enough time—nor is it a conversation I'm particularly looking forward to having.

"Wren Marie, you've been avoiding me for weeks! Do Tom and I need to come back to Philadelphia *again* just to get you to talk to us?"

"No," I blurt too loudly. The guys definitely heard that. After a deep breath, I level my voice. "It was bad enough that you brought him along for

that god-awful intervention. What part of me saying I never want to see Thomas again do you not understand?”

I can practically hear my mom rolling her eyes as she says, “Honestly? All of it. There’s no reason for you to feel unsafe around him. You hit your head, and your brain came up with a story it thought made sense. I wish you’d stop trying to turn me against him.”

The same white-hot fury I felt all those years ago courses through me again, like it’s always been there, just waiting to resurface. “I didn’t misremember,” I grit out.

She sighs. “Don’t you think it’s time to let this go? It’s been years.”

“He hurt me,” I seethe as my free hand curls into a fist. My fingernails dig into my palm, but I barely notice the bite of pain. “Why would I let that go? Why would you even ask that of me?”

“Honey,” she says, and the odd mix of condescension and mock pity in her voice sends chills through me. “You were young. You had a lot of anger toward Thomas, and you let it all build up. I understand we weren’t perfect parents, but lying to drag him down is ridiculous. You should be more mature than this by now.”

“Which one is it?” I reply dryly. “Did I hit my head and misremember, or did I intentionally lie?”

“Well, why don’t you tell me?”

“It was neither! He scared me, and then he proved to me that I had every reason to be afraid of him. Don’t you find it odd how far I fell? That I woke up terrified? Why did you never even consider that maybe I was telling the truth? Because you never believed me. Not even for one goddamn second. Why, Mom? Why?”

She sputters. I roll my eyes, catching three figures standing in my peripheral vision. When I turn to them, my stomach drops at the concerned looks on their faces.

“I was yelling, wasn’t I?” I ask softly, watching as Elliot approaches.

“Yes,” my mom snaps in my ear, “you were. And it was *quite* rude of—”

“Oh, shut up, Patricia.” I end the call before stuffing my phone in my back pocket.

Elliot’s touch is gentle as he cups my cheek. “He hurt you.”

I nod.

Oliver and Rhett draw closer and stand on either side of us. Oliver looks like he wants to wrap me up in a hug, whereas Rhett looks ready to find my stepfather and beat the shit out of him. Probably more than that, honestly.

“I’m okay,” I say.

“How often?” Rhett asks. His voice is low. Dangerous.

“What?”

“How often did he hurt you, princess?” Oliver takes my hand, frowning when his thumb brushes against the indents my nails made in my palm.

“Once. It was just really bad.” My gaze falls to the floor. “Him and my mom were helping me move into my apartment. The elevator was crowded, so we were taking the stairs. Thomas and I went down to get more stuff from his car while my mom stayed in the apartment to organize stuff.

“We were fighting—I don’t even remember about what. But Thomas tried to corner me on a landing. He was always trying to intimidate me into doing what he wanted. That time . . . I don’t know, it felt different. I got scared, so I pushed him. And he pushed back. Really hard.”

Elliot’s eyes slide closed, and his chest rises as he takes a deep breath. “Then what?”

“I, um. I tripped. And then I . . . fell. Down a flight of stairs.”

“He pushed you down a flight of stairs?” Rhett growls, and when I look at him, his expression is murderous.

I nod silently.

A concerned sound leaves Oliver’s throat, and he squeezes my hand. “Your mom didn’t believe you.”

“Not even for a second,” I whisper. “Or maybe she did, but she decided it wasn’t worth it to fight with Thomas. She loved him. Still does. And he’s also the only reason we were able to have any stability, so I understand why she wouldn’t want to leave him. He was her financial security.”

“She still should’ve believed you.” Oliver wraps me up in his arms. “I’m so sorry, princess. That sounds awful.”

“The worst of it was being stuck in the hospital. I was so afraid that Thomas would do something else, especially when he refused to admit to what he’d done. But I couldn’t make him leave. He was my financial security, too. If I kicked him out . . .” I choke on the rest of the words. Sometimes it still feels like it happened yesterday.

“If you kicked him out and made Thomas too angry, he could’ve left you in a pile of medical debt,” Oliver finishes for me.

I blink back tears. “He played the part of the concerned stepfather—the only time he ever did—so of course he paid for everything. *Not* paying would only make him look like an asshole. But I was afraid to push him too far, and he wouldn’t leave the hospital room. I was stuck.”

“Never again,” Rhett says firmly. He steps closer so I’m basically surrounded by the three of them. “You never have to see him again.”

“That was my plan, but then he was at that dinner.”

“And that’s *never* happening again,” Elliot says. “I’ll kill him before I let him lay his eyes on you one more time.”

My heart melts at the sincerity in his tone. “You don’t have to say that.”

“He means it,” Oliver says softly. “We’d all do it.”

I kiss each of them with the hopes that it’ll convey the words that I can’t seem to get out right now. Rhett was worried the other day that I’d be scared of him, but I’ve never felt safer.

All three of the guys hug me at once, and I relax into their hold. Eventually, I manage to whisper, “Thank you.”

A single tear makes its way down my cheek before dripping onto Elliot’s shirt. I blink the rest away before resting my head on Oliver’s shoulder.

I love you all so much.

I don’t say the words out loud. Rhett isn’t ready, and I can wait a little longer. What matters is that I know how I feel. Two months ago, I never would’ve predicted falling for the three regulars from work. But now? I’m deeply and irrevocably in love with each of these three men.

I’m not sure if I believe in soul mates or fate, but I do know that I believe in us. And as I feel Rhett press a kiss to my hair, a soft smile touches my lips, because I think that’s probably the only thing that truly matters.

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Chapter Eleven

Oliver

If I had my way, I'd never step into the Garden Grille again. Places that I associate with past jobs are ones I tend to avoid, but I couldn't find it in my heart to say no. When my mom wants something, there isn't a single thing I wouldn't do to make sure she gets it. So if she wants to try out a new restaurant with me and Maria, then that's exactly what's gonna happen.

"Reservation for Meredith Moore?" I tell the woman waiting behind the hostess stand.

With a smile, she says, "Right this way."

As I follow her through the tables, I keep my unease tucked away. The last time I was here, it set off a chain of events that almost got Wren killed. Not to mention, the last time *she* was here, Adam followed her into that alley to do god knows what to her.

Out of all the restaurants in Philadelphia, why did Mom have to choose this one?

My mom and Maria are seated at a table with a view of what I'm sure is a gorgeous garden in the spring and summer months. Maria waves when she

spots me, and I thank the hostess before she walks off.

“No Wren?” my mom asks. To her credit, she tries to hide her disappointment, but I know her well enough to see through it. “I thought she was coming today.”

“I said she *might* come today.” I kiss her on the cheek and give Maria a hug before sitting down across from them. “We’ve got a lot going on, and her coming today just didn’t work. I’m sorry—I shouldn’t’ve gotten your hopes up.”

“It’s all right,” she says, but her expression is filled with concern. “What’s going on that’s keeping you four so busy? This is the third time we’ve had to schedule a makeup lunch.”

“Work stuff. It’s all pretty boring, honestly. Puts me to sleep when it’s not stressing me out. I’d rather not talk about it.”

At that, Maria jumps in. “Okay, but what about Wren? Why couldn’t she come today?”

“She just . . .”

Dammit. Why do little sisters have to be so annoying?

“I’m beginning to think this woman is a ghost,” Mom says with a teasing sparkle in her eyes.

“Oh, she’s real,” Maria says. “And she’s super pretty, too.”

“So you’ve said.” Mom reaches across the table and rests her hand over mine. “Is something wrong? If you aren’t ready for us to meet her, you can just tell us. You know we’ll understand, right?”

“Speak for yourself,” Maria grumbles.

“No, I want you to. And she wants to meet you guys, too. It’s just . . .”

“It’s just *what?”* Maria asks with exasperation. “I’m tired of waiting!”

“Elliot’s parents dropped by the other day,” I say tiredly, watching as realization blooms on my mom’s face. “At best, it went poorly. At worst, it was a disaster. We all assured Wren that you guys are nothing like Kathleen and Joe, but she needs more time to recover.”

My mom narrows her eyes, and a protectiveness that’s usually reserved for me and Maria flashes in them. “What did they say to her?”

Grabbing the water in front of me, I gulp down half the glass before continuing. “Kathleen basically implied it wouldn’t last. Said it was telling that Ell hadn’t told his mom about Wren, and that it’s too early to be committed to her, et cetera. You know how she is. She got jealous, so she tried to make Wren feel insecure about her standing with Elliot. Didn’t work, thank fuck.”

My mom is silent, and she’s looking at me like she’s waiting for more. When I don’t say anything else, she sighs. “And?”

“Mom, it’s—”

“What else did that monster of a woman say?” she demands.

I drain my glass. “We forgot about Elliot’s birthday.”

Maria gasps and pulls out her phone. “Shit! I meant to text him.”

“Even Ell forgot. And when Kathleen realized, she let loose. Everything we knew she said behind our backs, she told us directly to our faces. Elliot settled for us, we don’t love him well enough, he’ll realize it eventually, he should leave, blah blah blah. She said that Rhett—fuck, I don’t wanna repeat it. It was a mess, okay? Eventually, Elliot kicked her and Joe out. I think he was a little shocked that Kathleen would actually say all that.”

“One of these days,” my mom says before taking a concerningly long sip of wine, “that woman is going to drive me to murder.”

That draws a chuckle from me. Whenever she makes comments like that, I realize it's no wonder I ended up taking the life path I did.

"I know you guys would never be cruel to Wren," I say. "But she's been through some really horrible stuff lately. I can't get into the details, but it's really bad. She's been pushing herself so hard, and no matter how much she wants to meet you two, she's just not ready. Maybe once life has calmed down, which should be in the next couple weeks."

"There's no pressure." Mom squeezes my hand. "I'm excited to meet her, but I'm happy to wait until she's comfortable."

Maria huffs. "Well, *I* don't want to wait. Maybe I can drop by sometime this week? Kinda like a surprise? And then I can meet her, even if it's only for a couple minutes?"

"If Wren isn't ready, we need to respect her boundaries," Mom says. "You know that."

With a groan, Maria slumps in her chair. "I *suppose* you're right."

Even though Maria may be disappointed, deep down, I know she understands. That's the difference between Rhett's and Elliot's families and mine. Mom and Maria have basic human decency.

"I don't think it'll be that much longer," I assure them. "And I promise, you'll like her. She's one of the kindest, most understanding people I've ever met. I . . ."

Shit. Should I say this?

My mouth is abnormally dry all of a sudden, and I realize my glass is already empty.

"What?" Maria asks impatiently. "What's with you not finishing your sentences today?"

When I fix my eyes on my mom, she's already smiling. Of course she knows. She's the one who helped me work through my feelings for Rhett and Elliot when I was too scared that I'd ruin everything by admitting how head over heels I was for them.

"You love her." She doesn't phrase it as a question.

"An unfathomable amount."

Maria's jaw drops. "WHAT?"

My mom's smile widens. "I know the feeling."

There's not a doubt in my mind that she understands. The love she has for me and Maria is the strongest I've ever seen. It's always been a goal of mine to match it.

"Come on," Maria groans. "You're that far along in your relationship, and I *still* can't meet her?"

I roll my eyes. If Maria was serious, I'd tell her to stop, but this is just our dynamic. Neither of us have much patience.

"Soon, I promise."

"When I finally meet her, I'm stealing her away from you for at least a day," Maria says. "We can go shopping and get ice cream and maybe walk along the river. Oooh, and she likes books, right? We can go to the library! Or a bookstore."

"Oh?" I raise an eyebrow. "And who's funding this shopping trip?"

"You, of course!"

At that, Mom laughs. "Maybe you should ask permission first."

"Already did." Maria turns her phone in my direction. It's open to her messages with Elliot.

Maria: I know I can't meet Wren yet, but when I can, I'm taking her on a shopping trip.

Maria: You're paying.

Elliot: Anything for two of my three favorite women.

Elliot: Don't tell my mother I said that.

"Ugh, of course you went to Ell. He spoils you."

"*You* spoil her," Mom corrects, and I don't miss the gratitude in her eyes. "You spoil both of us."

"What kind of son and brother would I be if I didn't?"

"A shitty one I'd enjoy punching in the face," Maria says with all the confidence in the world. She winks at me before her expression turns serious. "I'm happy for you, Ollie. You've found so much love in your life, and I'm glad you get to share it with another person."

"I'm happy, too. I can't imagine life without any of them."

From there, conversation flows easily until our food comes. Every time we get close to the topic of my work, I steer us in another direction. We vowed to each other years ago that we'd never let our families in on our revenge plans. For all my mom's side comments about murder, I don't think she'd agree with our methods. She doesn't even kill spiders, for fuck's sake.

"Ugh, I'm *so full,"* Maria groans once she's finished her food. "But that was delicious. We've gotta come back here sometime soon."

When Mom nods in agreement, I clench my fist under the table. *Fuck.* This place sets me off so much that it's making me nauseous.

"You okay, hon?" Mom asks as she nods to my plate. "You didn't eat much."

"Just wasn't as hungry as I thought I was."

She frowns but doesn't press it any further.

When our server comes with the bill, I hand them my card before my mom can. She may admit to me spoiling them, but she usually puts up some

kind of fight. It's the only thing I expect after she's spent most of my life dedicated to making sure me and Maria ended up okay.

"You know you don't always have to pay, right?" she asks.

"MOM." Maria glares at her. "Let him pay without harassing him for once."

Holding up her hands in surrender, Mom sits back in her seat. "I just want to make sure he knows."

"I know I don't have to," I reply. "I *want* to, Mom. You sacrificed so much to take care of us when we were kids. It's my turn to take care of you."

"You don't owe me anything, honey."

"So stubborn," Maria mutters under her breath.

As I squeeze Mom's hand, I can't help my smile. Both of us inherited at least a little of her stubbornness. "I'm not doing it out of obligation. You deserve it, whether you want to accept it or not. Besides, Elliot and Rhett would kill me if I stopped. Fuck, Wren probably would, too. You're the only good parent we've got between the four of us."

That makes her laugh, which was my goal. "There isn't much competition."

"Mom, there's *no* competition." I grin. "We're the luckiest kids in the world because of you."

Our server comes back with my card and receipt, and once I've dealt with them, we stand.

"Thank you, Oliver." Mom cups my cheek before embracing me. "I couldn't've asked for better kids."

I keep her in my arms for a second longer than I need to. If she knew what I spend my time doing, I'm not sure she'd still say that. It's why she

can never know. The danger alone would keep her up at night.

“Love you, Mom. I’ll see you soon?”

“Of course. Just let me know what day next week works for you, and we’ll get together again. As long as you have the time?”

“If I don’t have it, I’ll make it.” I kiss her on the forehead.

“And you’d better get your shit together, too,” Maria says as she pulls me into a hug. “I wanna meet Wren soon.”

“As soon as she’s ready,” I promise. “Love you.”

“Love you, too.” With a peck on my cheek, she pulls away.

I watch them weave through the tables and exit out the front doors. For the most part, my mom and Maria seem carefree and happy. I always planned on finding a way to make their lives easier, and I was determined to become a famous pianist to ensure it happened.

Most likely, I was delusional, but my heart was in the right place. And while I wasn’t able to provide for them financially on my own, Elliot jumped on the idea to help them.

With a sigh, I gather my things and head for the front of the restaurant. My focus is on not puking until I find the bathroom, which is probably why I don’t notice two men enter the dining room from the kitchen and approach me.

“Moore. What a surprise. I didn’t expect to see you here—especially alone.”

My blood runs cold at the all-too-familiar voice, but when I turn, I keep my smile bright.

Holloway is wearing his signature red leather jacket, and it causes dozens of memories to flash through my mind at once. For years, all we had was

that damn name—*Redback*. His stupid jacket always reminds me of how long it took us to uncover his identity.

“Ludo. I could say the same.”

A large man is standing close to Ludo with his hands clasped in front of him. I recognize him immediately by the upside-down cross tattoo on his left temple. His long dark hair is pulled back into a bun, and most of his light skin is covered in other tattoos.

Fuck, I don’t remember his name.

“Not quite, considering I own the place,” Ludo replies.

“Oh! Last I knew, the Williams family owned it.”

He exchanges a glance with the man standing next to him, although I can’t decipher what it means. “You three really research thoroughly, don’t you?”

“One of our specialties.”

“Yes, well, as I’m sure you heard, the Williams family came to a rather unfortunate end a few weeks ago. I’m just doing my part in making sure their businesses stay running and profitable.”

Doing his part. That’s one way to put it.

“How much have you bought up?”

“Most of it,” he says with a greedy smile.

It makes sense. This was Ludo’s plan all along, although I imagine it took a shit ton of money. Unless he had other ways of obtaining the Williams’s properties and businesses.

“Congrats,” I say enthusiastically, even though the little food in my stomach has quickly soured.

“Thank you.” Ludo gestures to the man beside him. “This is Axel Holden, my right-hand man.”

“Pleasure,” Axel says with a tight smile.

Neither of us extend our hands, and I ignore the way he sizes me up. Instead, I say, “Well, Ludo, I wish you the best of luck with your new endeavors. I’ll see you around?”

“Of course. You’ll be at the wedding?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

After a nod goodbye, I turn on my heel and walk straight into the bathroom. Thankfully, it’s empty in here, so I let my composure fall the second the door shuts behind me.

Gripping the counter with both hands, I force myself to take deep, even breaths. Having to come here was bad enough already. Everything about this place reminds me of the events that led to Wren’s kidnapping. We almost lost her, and it all started because we took that job. It doesn’t matter that we found her and got her out safely. The terror on her face, the tears in her eyes . . . they’ll haunt me for the rest of my life.

As for Ludo, I wasn’t expecting to see his face today. His annoying, smug, stupidly punchable face. He’s ruined so much of our lives, and he’ll continue to until we finally kill him.

“Just a few more weeks,” I whisper to myself. The wedding is approaching quickly, and after that, we’ll have the evidence we need to destroy his reputation, close down his businesses on counts of money laundering and tax fraud, and god knows what else.

Once I’ve regained my composure, I straighten my shirt and exit the bathroom. Ludo and Axel don’t seem to be in the dining room anymore. My first assumption is that they must be in the back, but then I catch a glimpse of red in the garden. It’s too cold to sit out there, nor is anything in bloom yet.

There’s only one reason for them to be lingering outside. It’s the perfect place to have a private conversation.

My car is closer to the main entrance, but there’s nothing wrong with taking the scenic route—even if the garden is all brown and dusted in a thin layer of snow. I’m just getting some extra fresh air, that’s all.

I leave the restaurant through the garden door, making sure it closes without a sound. There’s a pathway that leads to the street, but I meander, taking in the barren bushes as I do.

Ludo and Axel aren’t in sight, thanks to a row of tall arborvitae bushes that they stepped around. They’re close enough together that they’re concealed from prying eyes, but it also means they have no idea I’m on the other side.

I step as close as I possibly can without rustling the bushes. Their conversation is just loud enough to be audible over the traffic not even thirty yards away.

“I want this dealt with before the wedding,” Ludo is saying, and the consistent sound of footsteps tells me he’s probably pacing. “We only have half the information we need. Huxley was behind Aubrey’s attempted kidnapping, but *how?* Who could’ve possibly fed him our location?”

“What about Moore and his partners? Could they be rats?”

My shoulders tense at Axel’s accusation. The last thing we need is for Holloway to cast suspicion on us.

“No, that wouldn’t make much sense,” Ludo says.

“They were there when Aubrey was almost kidnapped.”

“And they *saved* her,” Ludo snaps. “You’re smarter than this, Axel. I didn’t make you my most trusted man because of your good looks. Use your fucking brain.”

Axel's voice stays perfectly level, like he's used to putting up with Ludo's bad moods. "It's possible they staged it. It's rather convenient that it happened in their penthouse instead of when they were out and about, don't you think?"

"Then explain why Andrew had to steal a key card for Huxley's men to even get up to the penthouse. Why would they have him do that when they could've just given him one?

"Not to mention, they don't know who Andrew is. Wren met him briefly when Jordan captured her, but she was so scared that she didn't recognize him. Even if she figured it out, she has no idea Andrew is with us now. I made sure he stayed out of sight while we were in Florida."

"Do you think Wren is working separately from her partners?" Axel asks. "She's a new addition to their relationship, correct? Maybe she infiltrated them to get close to you?"

"No. She's too weak. Easy to manipulate, as well."

I grit my teeth. Wren is far from weak. Maybe Ludo manipulated her when we were in Florida, maybe not. She had so much going on in her head when she jumped into that pool without thinking. It's hard to get the full picture on why she did what she did.

"Wren *has* gotten pretty close to Aubrey lately," Axel points out.

"Because unfortunately, everyone on this goddamn planet seems to be in love with my fiancée," Ludo growls.

Axel sighs. "If you're sure."

"Keep your suspicion of them if you want. It won't hurt anything. But I've tested the men, and they've earned my trust. Wren isn't a threat."

Relief billows through me. Not only is Ludo refusing to even consider that we betrayed him, but he's also severely misjudging Wren. She may be

sweet and caring, and she may still be early on in her training, but she's strong as hell. And now, I'm realizing just how much of an advantage that gives us over Ludo.

"Do you have any suspicions, then?" Axel asks.

"I do," Ludo says, and I lean forward so I don't miss the next part. "There were only a few people who knew Aubrey and I were in Florida. I've already gone through the entire list, and it wasn't any of them."

"Then who?"

"I think it was Owen."

"Owen?" Axel laughs. "Owen Harris?"

"The one and only."

"Come on, boss. How could that be possible?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe he overheard something while he was cleaning. He blends into the background so easily. Maybe someone slipped up."

That's enough.

Slowly, I back up. The longer I stay, the more likely it is that I'll get caught. I want to continue listening to their conversation, but it's not worth the risk. So I leave quietly, getting onto the main path in the garden that leads to the sidewalk.

Once I'm in my car, I can't stop myself—I laugh. We've spent so much time and effort working to get close to Ludo. Knowing that he's not even willing to entertain suspicion of us is the most satisfied I've felt in a long, long time.

As I turn on the engine and pull out of my parking spot, my shoulders feel lighter than they have in months. Everything is finally working out—like there really *is* a light at the end of the tunnel.

Not only that, but Ludo won’t know what hit him until it’s too late. We’ll get our revenge, Sammy will get her justice, and we’ll be able to move on with our lives.

Just a couple more weeks, I tell myself as I pull onto the interstate. *Just a couple more weeks, and then we can finally be happy.*

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Chapter Twelve

Rhett

There are a lot of things I appreciate about Finn. The man has never been late a day in his life, he's not one to pry into personal matters without an invitation, and he's always there when we need him. Not to mention, he has a wide skill set and access to a large number of resources that are incredibly useful.

But today, all those things pale in comparison to his dedication to making sure Wren is as ready as possible for the wedding. When it comes to protecting the people we love, Finn knows no limits. He may not know Wren well yet, but he understands that she's part of our family. His loyalty to us extends to her.

"It's fairly simple to use," Finn explains as he holds the safe cracking device up for Wren to see. Then he fits it over the dial on the safe I bought so she could practice. "It goes on like this. The only logical way to place it, really, so it should be easy to remember. It has magnets on it to latch it to the safe. You don't have to hold it the entire time, and it'll turn on its own once you get it going."

“Got it.” Wren takes the device when Finn hands it to her and places it over the dial the way he did. “Seems fairly simple.”

He shows her how to turn it on before pulling her back a step or two. “You’ll want to be sure not to bump the safe while you’re using it. It works by detecting the click of each pin coming into place, so any large vibrations could throw it off.”

“No large vibrations.” Wren frowns. “What about the music from the reception? Will that be a problem?”

Turning to the coffee table, Finn scans the blueprints of Ludo’s mansion. He points to the ballroom on the first floor. “This is where everyone will be?”

“Yes.” Wren spins the blueprint of the second floor around so Finn can look at it properly. “And this is where Ludo’s billiard room is.”

Finn narrows his eyes as he does some mental calculations. He runs a hand through his dark hair, and I’m worried it’s going to be a problem, but then he says, “Considering the distance between them, you should be fine. Just don’t jump around while you’re waiting for it.”

Wren laughs. “I don’t think jumping around would’ve even crossed my mind, but good to know.”

The cracker takes a couple minutes, and then we hear a loud *click.* Finn gestures to it, and Wren takes the device off before opening the safe.

“Perfect,” Finn says. “From here, what happens?”

“I take the hard drive and the cracker and put them both in Aubrey’s makeup bag, close the safe, put the painting back in place, and get the hell out of there.”

Elliot has been standing silently by the fireplace, but now he cuts in. “Aubrey said that the painting seemed to be on hinges. My guess is there

are magnets installed in the wall and on the back of the painting. That way, the unattached side doesn't swing out from the wall randomly and reveal the safe. So expect some resistance when you're pulling it back."

"Got it."

Finn closes and locks the safe. "Again. You're practicing until you can do this with your eyes closed. Odds are, you're not gonna have great lighting."

Before Wren gets back to work, she moves to where I'm sitting in an armchair and kisses me. "Still not afraid of you," she whispers so only I hear.

It's the third time she's told me that since she watched me kill Austin. Her reassurance is sweet, and while I believe her, I'm worried I made a bad call by letting her come with me—not that she gave me much of a choice.

I don't want Wren to have to get used to violence in preparation for some unknown event in the future. That's a horrible way to live, and she deserves so much better.

I watch silently as Wren practices cracking the safe again and again. I'm so focused on her that I almost don't notice the sound of the garage door opening.

Oliver must be home.

Knowing that eases some of the tightness in my chest. Normally, we don't go places alone—safety in numbers and all that. But today, we decided we could make an exception.

Ludo's reputation and his strong list of allies keep him safe. We've used a similar strategy to ensure that when we make enemies, they don't come after us. People in our circles know how skilled we are, and they're only becoming more aware of just how ruthless we can be.

Currently, rumors are getting out that Holloway—along with us—is behind the fall of the Williams family. I'm not sure who discovered the brutal scene we left at Jordan's property, but it sent the message we hoped it would. Hurt one of us, and you won't live to tell the tale.

Still, I didn't realize just how worried I was about Oliver until now. He's humming, and the closer he gets, the more I find myself relaxing.

When Oliver steps into the room, he spots Wren immediately, and a smile forms on his face. Relief shines in his eyes as he sweeps Wren into his arms and spins her around without warning. She lets out a delighted laugh, grabbing on to his shoulders. She doesn't let go, even after he's set her down.

"Hi, princess."

"Hi—"

"Oliver," Finn snaps. "We're in the middle of something here."

Ignoring him, Oliver says to Wren, "You're perfect. Fucking perfect, you know that?"

"What—" She's cut off by Oliver pressing his lips to hers. When he dips her backward, she moans and wraps her arms around his neck.

"Seriously?" Finn grumbles. "How do you idiots get any work done around here with all this kissing?"

Elliot and I exchange an amused yet relieved glance. I'm not sure what has Oliver in a better mood, but I hope it lasts. I like it when he's happy.

"What's this about?" Elliot asks when Oliver finally straightens.

"Wren." Oliver brushes his nose against hers, still smiling. "I ran into Ludo at the Garden Grille. He owns the place now."

Just like that, my hopeful mood dissipates, and dread creeps through my veins. "What did he say?"

“I only spoke to him briefly. It’s what I overheard a couple minutes later that matters. I saw him and Axel head out to the garden, so I followed to see if I could listen in on their conversation.”

“You did *what?”* I snap.

“Ol,” Elliot says, and the hurt in his voice makes me pause. “You know our rules.”

“I couldn’t help myself,” Oliver says, finally tearing his gaze from Wren but not letting her go. “And I was perfectly safe.”

Elliot throws his hands up. “Perfectly safe? There was no one to watch your back and no one to help you if something went wrong. What if—”

“You know,” Finn says as he slips his hands into his pockets, “working alone is a perfectly viable option.”

“Not for us,” Elliot snaps back with a fierce glare. “Not when we agreed to take the cautious route whenever possible. Ol, after Jordan, what the hell were you thinking? If someone saw you, it could’ve derailed our whole operation.”

Oliver sighs. “It sounds more dangerous than it actually was, okay? It looked like I was hanging out in the garden, and I just happened to be within earshot of Ludo and Axel. I saw the opportunity, and I couldn’t pass it up. Not when we’re so close.”

Elliot doesn’t look convinced, but I don’t want this to blow up into a big fight. Whatever Oliver overheard seems to have given him some hope, and I don’t want to change that. We can deal with what he did later.

“What did you overhear?” I ask.

“Stuff that looks good for us,” Oliver replies. “It sounds like they still haven’t found their rat, and Axel suggested us.”

Elliot frowns. “That doesn’t look good for us at all.”

“Oh, absolutely not. Except Ludo refused to even consider that we’d betray him. He said he’s tested us enough that he trusts us. And *you.”* Looking back to Wren, Oliver’s smile widens. “He doesn’t think you’re a threat at all, princess. He has no idea just how much of his downfall hinges on you.”

Her smile fades. “What did he say about me?”

Oliver hesitates. “He, um . . . The specifics don’t matter. What *does* matter is that the night of the wedding, you’ll be almost invisible to his men. Not only because you’re part of the bridal party, but because he’ll specifically tell his men you’re *not* a threat so they can focus on other people.”

Slowly, Elliot lowers himself onto the love seat. His eyes slide shut as he slouches into the cushions.

“Ell?” I ask. “You good?”

“Relieved,” he says on a heavy exhale.

I’m right there with him. Knowing that Wren will be able to fly completely under the radar takes a lot of stress off our shoulders. Unfortunately, if Oliver doesn’t stop putting himself in danger like this, it’s not going to help with Elliot’s anxiety at all.

“So if Ludo is that bought into you three,” Finn says, “then that means he won’t suspect you of helping Aubrey leave. *Or* of stealing the drive.”

“That’s how it seems,” Elliot replies.

Up until now, we’ve been hoping that Ludo’s trust in us will be enough. It’s not like he’d have much reason to suspect us anyway, other than Wren and Aubrey getting close. But now that we know how Ludo feels about Wren—and about all of us—it means we’re in the clear.

As long as the night of the wedding goes off without a hitch, that is.

“We’re hoping that Holloway will think Aubrey managed to steal the drive,” Elliot says. “Either that or she was working with his rat. And now, even if he comes to a different conclusion, we know he won’t suspect us. Not unless we give him a reason to—which we won’t.”

“Do you think he’ll involve you once he finds her missing?” Finn asks.

“I wasn’t sure,” Elliot says, “but O, after what you just said, I think he will. Holloway trusts us more than we thought. Knowing him, he’ll want Aubrey brought home as soon as possible. I wouldn’t be surprised if he hires us to find her, so we’ll have to play along until she contacts him.”

“Did you overhear anything else?” Finn asks Oliver.

“Just that Ludo thinks he might know who his rat is. Owen Harris? I’ve never heard of him. Axel was in complete disbelief that it could be him.”

“That’s Sparrow’s man.” The color drains from Finn’s face as he yanks his phone from his pocket. He types away furiously before swearing and placing it to his ear. “Sparrow? Ludo is on to Harris.” A pause. “Oliver Moore overheard a conversation.” Another pause, and Finn nods. “Just let me know if you need anything.”

Once he shoves his phone in his pocket, I ask, “Will she be able to get him out in time?”

“Hopefully. I’ll keep you updated.” Finn rubs his face with both hands before turning to Wren. “It’s great news that Ludo doesn’t think of you as a threat, but it’s not going to matter if you’re not prepared.”

“Right.” Oliver glances behind Wren to where the safe is. “You figuring it out okay?”

“Yeah,” Wren says. “But I really should keep practicing. I want to be familiar with the process.”

With a kiss to the tip of her nose, Oliver releases her. “I won’t stop you. Actually, I’ve got some stuff to work on, unless you guys need me down here?”

“Get out,” Finn says as he pulls Wren toward the safe. “The less distractions, the better.”

With a playful roll of his eyes, Oliver heads back out. I turn my attention to Elliot, who’s still sitting quietly with his eyes closed. *Dammit.* I get what Oliver was trying to do, and the information he got was helpful, but he can’t keep pulling this shit.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” I say.

“*Please* take your time,” Finn replies.

I catch up with Oliver in the upstairs hallway. “Hey. Can we talk?”

“Sure.” He steps into his bedroom. “C’mon.”

Once I’m inside, I shut the door. Oliver begins unbuttoning his shirt while he watches me with a raised eyebrow.

“I get that the opportunity to eavesdrop on Ludo’s conversation was tempting,” I say. “But Elliot’s anxiety is at an all-time high. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him this worried.”

A shadow crosses over Oliver’s face, and he nods in agreement. “I know. That’s a big part of why I spied on Ludo today. We need to end this as quickly and cleanly as possible.”

“Yeah,” I say. “But you know what it’s like when you can’t stop worrying. We always try to be there for you when things get bad. Right now, Elliot needs us to help him in whatever way possible. The least we can do is to not put ourselves in unnecessary danger.”

Oliver shakes his head. “The more we know, the sooner we can get this over with. *That’s* what will soothe Elliot’s anxiety. Not continuing to play it

safe. I'm worried, too. That's why I want Ludo chained up downstairs as soon as possible and everything that belongs to him burned to the ground."

"Yes, but—"

"No. We knew we'd have to take risks. This was a relatively small one considering it's given us the peace of mind to continue with our current plan. Knowing Ludo doesn't see Wren as a threat—that means she'll practically be invisible to his men the night of the wedding. They'll be on the lookout for *real* threats. Didn't you see Elliot's reaction when I told you what I heard? He looked so relieved."

"About *Wren*, yes. But now he's worried about you going off on your own and getting yourself killed."

Oliver is in the middle of pulling his shirt off, but my words make him pause. "Oh."

"You're beginning to establish a pattern," I tell him gently. "First, it was getting yourself kidnapped to save Wren. Now, it's this. Trust me, I get it. But just think about Elliot next time, okay?"

"I'm just tired of living our lives based on *what ifs."* He rolls his eyes as he tosses his shirt onto the bed. "Which is stupid of me to say, I know."

"O . . ."

"I'm sorry," he says softly. "You two have always been so patient with my anxiety. I'm just not used to having to do the same for Ell. I don't like how shaken he is by this." He runs a hand over his face before staring at the floor. "It scares me."

"I know." Pulling him into a hug, I stroke a hand down his spine.

Normally, Oliver is the one full of *what ifs.* Elliot and I always do our best to be accommodating. Planes make him less anxious than driving, so

we fly whenever we can. Not working alone was actually *his* idea because he'd get so worried when one of us did a job by ourselves.

Now we're used to it, and having one of them with me has saved my ass more times than I care to admit. The most recent incident being Adam, although the fucker didn't actually pose a threat.

"I know you're trying to help him," I murmur, and his arms tighten around my waist. "But I think what Elliot needs right now is predictability."

"Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense." The words are muffled considering Oliver is speaking directly into my chest. He makes no move to let go of me, so I continue running my fingers up and down his back.

"I want this to be over, too," I whisper.

I can't deny that I need to destroy Ludo in every way possible. But there's also no getting around the fact that the path we've taken is slowly wearing us down. I haven't seen Elliot read for pleasure in god knows how long. Oliver has been distracted with our project for Wren, but otherwise, I've missed the joy that usually sparkles in his eyes.

As for me, I can't say I'm much worse, but that's because I'm used to the exhaustion that comes with being in a constant state of anger. If anything, approaching Ludo's demise is helping me. I'm getting closer and closer to finally letting loose.

"I won't do it again," Oliver says after a minute. "No more going off on my own."

"I'm not the one who needs to hear it."

With a sigh, Oliver pulls away. "I'll talk to him. It's the least he deserves."

"Sooner than later, yeah?"

He nods. “And I think we should give Wren her surprise today. She deserves it with how hard she’s working, and I think it’ll cheer Ell up, too.”

“Is it ready?”

“Ell said he has one last thing to add to it. Apparently it arrived this morning.”

“Perfect. But apologize first, okay?”

“I know. I’ll do it once Wren is done practicing with the safe. There’s no way Elliot is leaving her side.”

With a hum of agreement, I press my lips to Oliver’s forehead. Elliot can’t be there with Wren the night of the wedding, but he’ll do everything he can to help her before and after. We all will. I just hope it’s enough.

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Chapter Thirteen

Oliver

Once Finn leaves, Elliot disappears into his office. My guess is he's looking into this Owen Harris person. Whoever he is, he has Sparrow's trust, and he's also managed to gain at least some of Ludo's. Well, at least he did before Ludo figured out who his rat was.

The thing is, I'm not convinced Owen is the man Ludo is looking for, and my guess is that Elliot isn't, either. Sparrow would never endanger Aubrey. So why would her informant give away Aubrey's location to someone who would want to harm her? Maybe Owen has his own motives that Sparrow is unaware of?

Regardless, I have more important things to focus on right now. Mainly, Elliot. I didn't realize just how much extra stress I've put on his shoulders, which is pretty damn stupid. Of course I should've known. If our roles were switched, I'd probably have Elliot tied down somewhere to make sure he wasn't risking his life when he didn't need to.

I knock on his office door. "Ell?"

"Come in."

My heart beats rapidly as I step into Elliot's office. He's sitting at his desk and frowning at his computer, which is a position I've found him in far too often these days.

After a second too long of silence, he looks up. "You okay?"

"I . . ." The words catch in my throat, and as I stare at Elliot, guilt crashes into me. He looks horrible. I was trying to help, but all I've done is add more weight for him to carry.

Standing, Elliot moves around his desk. With a few quick, long strides, he's right in front of me and cupping my cheek. "What's wrong?"

Fuck. Even now, when I've made his anxiety so much worse, he's the one checking up on me. There's no world in which I could possibly deserve him.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "Ell, I'm so sorry. I should've thought about you guys before going off on my own."

He releases a heavy sigh. "I should've predicted it, honestly."

"What do you mean?"

"You're always the first one to throw yourself into the line of danger if you think it means saving one of us. This is no different. You're trying to protect us."

"But it backfired. I didn't want to cause you more stress."

"It didn't backfire. Not entirely, anyway. You possibly saved a man's life."

"I don't care!" It's not true, but right now, my only thoughts are of Elliot. "I don't know how to handle seeing you this worried, and I hate that I'm making it worse."

"I'll be fine, Ol. Don't worry about me." He leans in to kiss me, but I grab his face.

“I won’t do it again. I won’t do anything without discussing it with you guys first. No more impulsiveness on my part. I promise.”

His brows draw together. “You mean it?”

“With everything in me,” I whisper. “It’s the least I can do. I’m so sorry, Elliot.”

“Apology accepted.”

When Elliot tries to kiss me this time, I let him, savoring the feeling of his lips against mine. This close, the bright scent of oranges fills my nostrils, followed by the warmth of sandalwood. As long as I live, I’ll never get enough of the way he smells.

“It seems like Wren is doing well,” I say, hoping to keep Elliot thinking of positive things. “I think she’ll be able to pull this off pretty easily.”

“You think so?” Elliot’s eyes brighten. “She seems nervous yet confident at the same time.”

“Maybe she’s just tired.”

“A possibility.” He rubs his chin. “Is her surprise ready? I finished my last detail about an hour ago.”

“Oh?” It’s the one thing even Rhett and I don’t know about this project. Elliot refused to tell us. “What is it?”

He smirks. “You’ll see. It’s ready?”

“Yeah. I was gonna suggest we show it to her today. We could all use a little fun.”

Grabbing my hand, he pulls me toward the door. “Let’s find the others, then.”

Wren and Rhett are still in the living room pouring over the blueprints. As we enter, Wren rubs at her eyes like she’s having trouble focusing.

“Where . . .” She blinks a few times before squinting at the papers spread out on the coffee table. “Where do I need to avoid again?”

“Preferably, this area of the second floor.” Rhett points to a spot that’s a decent distance from the bedrooms and the billiard room. “Ludo’s office is over here, and there’s no reason to be in that area. It would look pretty odd, even if he has no reason to be suspicious.”

“Got it,” she says tiredly.

“Here.” Rhett grabs a red pen and draws an X over Ludo’s office. Then he takes a green one and circles the bedroom and the billiard room.

“Can I have that?” she asks, and once he’s handed it to her, she rolls her shoulders back. “So the reception takes place here.” She circles the ballroom on the first floor’s sheet before drawing a line to the stairs. “And these are the stairs I’m taking.” Grabbing the red pen, she draws an X over another set of stairs that are much closer to Ludo’s office. “And I’m staying away from these.”

“Correct,” Rhett says. He scooches closer to her on the couch and starts rubbing her back as she continues drawing.

“And once I’m up the stairs, I follow the main hallway to the bedrooms,” Wren mumbles, drawing a green line before circling Aubrey’s room. “Makeup bag is in here, and then I head down this little hallway and sneak into the billiard room here.” She draws another green circle. “And I really don’t want to get caught in that part of the house.”

“Correct,” Rhett says. “There’s no reason for you to go past the bedrooms and down that hallway. You can always claim that you got lost, but there’s a slim chance they won’t believe you.”

“What if . . .” Wren traces a finger down the rest of the billiard room’s hallway. It takes her even closer to Ludo’s office. “Hmm. I definitely want

to stay away from there.”

“Definitely.”

“But as long as I’m quick,” Wren says as she moves her finger back to the bedrooms, “I won’t be visible in a suspicious part of the house for long. A minute or two tops.”

“That’s how it looks.”

With a shaky breath, Wren nods. “I can do that. I can make it work. And if I get caught, it’s no big deal. Probably.”

“I have faith in you.” Squeezing her waist, Rhett plants a kiss on her temple. She leans into him with a sigh and closes her eyes.

“Who wants to take a break?” I say. “Princess, we have something we want to show you.”

“Oh?” She glances between the three of us with a worried expression. “What is it?”

“Something nice.” Rhett strokes a hand over her hair before he stands. “C’mon.”

We lead Wren upstairs, and a giddy smile takes over my face. I’m tempted to blindfold her, but she’s familiar enough with the mansion that she’d know exactly where we’re headed.

“Are you three about to seduce me?” she asks as we pass my bedroom.

“No,” Elliot says. “It’s not that type of surprise. Well, most of it isn’t.”

“Close your eyes, sweetheart,” Rhett tells her when we reach his room. Once she does, he pushes open the door across from his and pulls her inside.

Elliot and I follow them, and I do a quick check to make sure everything is in place. It looks perfect, and I hope she thinks the same.

Placing his hand on the small of her back, Elliot whispers, “Go ahead and open them.”

I hold my breath. Wren’s expression goes from confused to delighted in a split second. She seems speechless as her gaze roams over the lilac walls, the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, and the reading nook in the corner. There’s a large mirror leaning against the wall opposite her bed, which is covered in a white and gray striped comforter.

She turns to us, and happy tears glisten in her eyes. “You guys . . . I . . . this is for *me?*”

“If there’s anything you don’t like, we can redo it,” I tell her.

Wren shakes her head as a smile takes over her face. “It’s perfect. It’s *more* than perfect.” She moves toward her nightstand, where a dark blue business card stands out against the white surface. “Avani Goswami, tattoo artist. What’s this for?”

“She’s the one who did our tattoos,” Rhett says.

“For . . .” Wren’s gaze lands on Rhett’s hand. “You want me to get a butterfly tattoo?”

“We know you never met Sammy,” I say, “but you’re helping to avenge her, and you’re a part of us. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“As long as you want to,” Elliot adds quickly. “You don’t have to.”

Wren’s eyes soften as she looks between the three of us. “Of course I want to. And this . . .” She waves her hand, gesturing around the room. “Thank you.”

“It’s the least we could do,” Elliot says as he takes her into his arms. “You belong here just as much as the rest of us do, and we want to make sure you know it.”

Her hands cup his face. “I do. I’ve never fit so perfectly in a place before.” Turning to Rhett, she says, “Or fit so perfectly with other people.”

When Wren’s lips meet his, he grabs her waist to pull her body against his. She doesn’t resist—fuck, she never does—and she slides both her hands down his chest. After she pulls away, her eyes stay closed for an extra second.

Wren’s content expression tugs at my heartstrings, or maybe at something deeper. Longing, I think. I’m hopeful that our current plan will work, and I’ve moved from distraction to distraction to keep myself from worrying too much. But I’m afraid that, despite our best efforts, everything is about to fall apart.

I wish we could always be happy like this.

Before my thoughts make their way to my face, Elliot pushes Wren toward me. She tackles me onto the bed before peppering my face with tiny, grateful kisses. With a laugh, I take hold of her head and press my lips to hers.

“Was the color your idea?” she asks me once I release her.

“Mmhmm. The bookshelves were Ell’s. The hook and mirror were Rhett’s. I think the painting was Ell’s, too. I certainly didn’t hang it.”

Wren surveys the room until her gaze lands on the painting that’s hanging above her dresser. It’s of a mountain landscape during sunset.

Her eyes widen, and then her jaw drops. “No way. That’s—that’s *the* painting. Elliot!”

He chuckles. “I figured that’s how you’d react.”

“Should I recognize it?” I ask.

“It was in the museum when we went there on our date,” Wren says breathlessly. “Elliot—he—he made me describe it to him while he made me

come.”

“Oh, shit.” I laugh and prop myself up on my elbows. “So that’s why you looked extra flustered. I thought it was just because we were in the museum.”

At the reminder, Wren squirms on top of me. “It was definitely both. Ell, I can’t believe you bought it just to put it up in here.”

“Your reaction made it worth it.” He comes up behind her and places his hands on her shoulders before leaning close. “And the reaction you’ll have every time you look at it in the future.”

“Fuck,” she whispers, and her eyes drift to the painting as she squirms again. “Is this part of your payback?”

He chuckles. “No. But it could be.”

A lustful look passes over her features, but then she frowns and glances around. “Wait. O, you mentioned a hook. What did you mean?”

With a growing smirk, I say, “Look up.”

She does, and immediately she notices the hook we installed in the ceiling. “What . . . ?”

“If you don’t know what it’s for,” Elliot says smoothly, “you’ll find out soon enough.”

Heat ignites in Wren’s eyes. “How much weight can it hold?”

“More than enough.”

“Oh, god,” she whispers.

“For another time,” Elliot tells her. “Not today.”

She stares at the hook for a couple seconds before she continues to take in the rest of the room. “I don’t have enough books to fill those shelves.”

“Maria wants to take you on a shopping spree when you’re ready to meet her,” I say. “No pressure, though. She’s fine with waiting, although she’s

super excited."

Watching Wren's eyes light up fills my heart to the brim. I never want to stop working to put that look on her face. "I'd like that. Maybe once we get the boys away from Ludo. You know, once things have calmed down."

"That sounds perfect."

Wren runs her hand over her new comforter. "I'm still gonna be able to sleep with you guys, right? And you guys with me?"

"Of course, you dork," I say. "There's no way I'm going more than a couple nights without falling asleep next to you."

As a smile blooms on her face, Rhett sits next to us on the bed. He's barely said a word, probably waiting to make sure Wren really likes it in here. He never admitted it, but he was nervous we'd decorated it all wrong. "You're happy with it in here? With the colors? With the layout?"

"It's perfect," she tells him, leaning over for a kiss. "I couldn't've wished for something better. Although . . ." She surveys the room. "What about the stuff at my apartment?"

"We'll make room for anything you want to keep," Rhett says. "Either in here or throughout the house. You don't have to fully move in, not if you don't feel like you're ready. Take as much time as you need."

"Thank you," she whispers before kissing him again. This time, it's much more deeply.

My hand rests on her side, and I squeeze lightly. "We'll do anything for you, princess."

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Chapter Fourteen

Wren

The day of the wedding sneaks up on me. I've been so focused on preparing that the days all blur together into one. Finn made me promise to practice with the safe every day, and I have. My lying skills aren't perfect, especially since I've only practiced in a controlled environment, but the guys seem happy with my progress.

As far as training with Rhett, I've gotten way better at a couple takedowns, and we focused on a few jab-punch and jab-kick combinations until I could do them in my sleep.

I'm as ready as I'm going to get, yet I'm a ball of nerves. All I've done for the past two weeks is eat, sleep, and breathe this heist. I've ignored quite a few annoyed texts from my mom, officially told my boss I quit, and studied the blueprints of Ludo's home until my eyes refused to focus.

Now, I'm sitting in the front seat of Elliot's SUV as he drives me to Ludo's mansion. The bridesmaids are all supposed to arrive before lunch, and then we have a long day of getting ready, taking pictures, and making sure today goes perfectly.

“Everything’s in place?” I ask for what feels like the hundredth time this week.

“Everything’s in place,” Elliot replies. His hand is already resting on my thigh, so he squeezes reassuringly.

After I practiced enough with the safe, we gave the cracking device to Aubrey. She was able to sneak it into the mansion without a problem. It’ll be waiting for me in her bedroom, already inside her spare makeup bag. The key to get into Ludo’s billiard room will be in there, too.

I trace my finger along the rose tattoo on the back of Elliot’s hand. His anxiety seems to have lessened. I know Oliver had a conversation with him because he had one with me, too, in which he promised not to go off on his own anymore.

“You’ll be okay,” Elliot says softly as we pull up to the mansion. “You’re ready.”

By the time he’s parked the SUV in the driveway, my palms are sweating. I’m terrified that Ludo will take one look at me and know everything I’m planning on doing tonight. The conversation Oliver overheard is the only thing keeping me from losing it.

“He doesn’t think I’m a threat,” I whisper to myself.

“He doesn’t,” Elliot says, but there’s a slight waver in his voice. “He has no reason to suspect us or you.”

“You’re sure?”

After unbuckling his seatbelt, he leans over the console and rests his forehead against mine. “I won’t lie and tell you I’m not worried, love. But Ludo said himself that he doesn’t think you’re a threat. That’s what I’m choosing to focus on.” His lips brush against mine before he squeezes his eyes shut. “It’s the only way I can get through this.”

I cup his cheek, wishing I had the courage or the right words to reassure him. All I have is a simple, “I’ll do my best, Ell.”

“I know,” he murmurs before he pulls back. “I’ll walk you in.”

My heart is in my throat as we approach the mansion. I keep most of my focus on making sure my dress doesn’t drag on the ground, and Elliot carries my other bag. Just looking at it makes my chest tighten. I have to hide the hard drive and the safe cracker in it once I’m clear of the billiard room.

At the front door, we’re greeted by an older woman with deep brown skin and black curls that brush the tops of her shoulders. She gives us a warm yet practiced smile that doesn’t reach her brown eyes. It’s almost identical to the one Aubrey uses when she’s in front of Ludo. “You must be Wren,” she says as she ushers us inside, eyeing Elliot. “And . . .one of your partners?”

“Elliot Hayes.” He shakes hands with her.

“Marceline Stallard,” she replies. “Aubrey’s mother. It’s so nice to finally be able to put faces to your names. Aubrey was quite insistent on adding you to her bridal party, Wren.”

“We hit it off quickly,” I say with a nonchalant shrug. “I’m honored to be here.”

Elliot slips my bag off his shoulder before handing it to me. When he leans in and kisses my cheek, I inhale deeply, letting the familiar smell of sandalwood and oranges wash over me. It soothes something deep inside me, and I exhale slowly.

“I’ll see you in a few hours, love.” His fingers brush against mine. “And just text us if you need us to grab anything for you.”

“Thanks. I love you.”

His breath catches, but then he smiles. I don’t think either of us are used to saying it to each other, let alone hearing it. “I love you, too, Wren. Have fun.”

My chest deflates as the front door closes behind him. I’ve gotten used to the safety that comes with always having one of the guys by my side, and I feel unsteady on my own.

Marceline clears her throat. “I can show you where you girls will be getting ready. You’re the first to arrive, although I’m sure the others won’t be long.”

“Thank you.”

Marceline’s strides are long and quick, like she has important things to get to. I wonder if it’s because today is her daughter’s wedding or if she’s always like this.

As she leads me through the mansion, I try to match up the layout with the images of the blueprints that are burned into my mind. It’s different in real life than it is on paper, but I’m able to gain my bearings within a minute.

Marceline takes me through the ballroom, which is all set up with a large dance floor, a bridal party table that’s front and center, and a bar in one corner. There are a couple people who seem to be working on final touches, and Marceline gives them cordial nods as we pass through.

Just as we’re halfway through the room, a few people come in carrying large floral arrangements. They’re beautifully done, a mixture of light pink peonies, eucalyptus, and other flowers I don’t recognize. Light pink ribbon is wrapped around the vases and tied off in neat little bows.

Marceline stops short. “What are these?”

“The table centerpieces, ma’am,” a woman replies as she sets the arrangement in the middle of one of the dining tables.

“But they’re *pink.”*

“Yes, ma’am. The bride requested pink peonies specifically.”

“Oh, for the love of god,” Marceline mutters before marching toward the other end of the ballroom.

I rush to keep up, only stopping once Marceline has led me into a side room. Inside, there are a few couches, a table laid out with pastries and drinks, and a vanity with a large mirror attached to it.

When Aubrey sees me, she immediately gets up from her spot on one of the couches. Tossing her phone on the table, she throws her arms around me. “I’m so glad you’re here. Thanks for keeping an eye out, Mom.”

“Aubrey,” Marceline says before I can get a word in. “The table centerpieces.”

“Oh, I know! Aren’t they gorgeous? They turned out even better than I thought they would.”

“We talked about this, dear. You need to be careful with the pink.”

Aubrey rolls her eyes at me like she’s heard that phrase a thousand times before. “I like pink.”

“You have to think about your *reputation,”* Marceline says in an almost scolding tone. “Pink doesn’t convey power. It doesn’t demonstrate professionalism or trustworthiness or strength.”

“Mom! This is my wedding, not a work event. Seriously?”

“Our clients will be here. Our partners, too. I thought we agreed that your wedding would be the start of a new era for you. One of maturity and respectability. Pink is a beautiful color, but you have to think about how people will perceive you. Our potential clients don’t want a sweet girl who

loves frills and champagne; they want a fierce woman who'll fight for them and take their problems seriously."

Aubrey crosses her arms. "I *am* a fierce woman. I *do* fight for my clients. And of course I take their problems seriously."

"Your father and I know that," Marceline says as she lays a hand on Aubrey's shoulder. "But that's not what people think when they look at you and all they see is pink, pink, and more pink."

"Well, it's too late now." Aubrey shrugs, and her mother's hand falls. "I guess my new era starts after Ludo and I get back from our honeymoon."

With a sigh, Marceline steps back. "Just remember—there's a lot riding on this marriage. More than just reputation."

"Act happy and in love, but not like I have a schoolgirl crush. I know, Mom."

Annoyance flickers over Marceline's features, but she decides not to push things anymore. "I'll leave you girls to chatting and getting ready. Remember, the photographer shows up in an hour and a half. Trust me, time flies on your wedding day. I'll be here to help keep things on schedule, but try to be aware. Photos alone take forever."

Aubrey's eyes soften, and she gives her mom a genuine smile. "Thanks. I have a few reminders set on my phone to help."

"Good. I'm going to find your grandmother and aunts and make sure they're comfortable. Oh, and that they know our schedule. We need to make sure everyone is on the same page."

Once Marceline is gone, Aubrey visibly relaxes. I set my bag on the floor and hang my dress on an empty rack in the corner.

"I know it's because she loves me," Aubrey says quietly, "but I've never wanted to run away more. I just want to be able to live without all this

pressure.”

“I think the flowers look nice,” I tell her as I pull her into another hug. It looks like she needs it. “And just think of it this way. In twenty-four hours, you’ll be nowhere near here, and your new life will be in your hands. No more pressure, no more expectations.”

“And as much pink as I want,” she mutters bitterly. Then she shakes her head and focuses on me. “How are you feeling? Nervous?”

“Incredibly. But I can do this. I know I can.” *I don’t have any other choice.*

“Well, how about I give you a tour before the others arrive?” She loops her arm through mine. “The least I can do is get you familiar with the place.”

We meander through the ballroom, and she points in a direction that apparently leads to the greenhouse. If I’m remembering correctly, the stairs that I’m supposed to avoid are in that direction as well.

“The stairs we’ll use to get to and from my room are in the foyer,” Aubrey tells me as we meander through the house.

Right. I remember passing them. They were hard to miss, considering how big they were.

Back in the foyer, we pass the front door and take the stairs on the left. They’re much larger than they need to be, but that seems to be the case for the whole mansion. It was obviously made to impress. Between the marble staircase and pillars and the amount of dark woodwork with ornate designs carved in, I’m sure it took a fortune to build this place.

Upstairs, we follow the main hallway for a minute before turning off to one that leads us toward the bedrooms. It’s the same path I’ll be taking by

myself later tonight. As we get closer, a door opens, and Ludo slams it before marching toward us.

“Aubrey,” he snaps as he holds up a thin strip of pink fabric. “What the fuck is this?”

“Your tie,” Aubrey replies with mock confusion. “Have you never seen one before?”

“It’s pink,” Ludo says with disgust. “It’s going to hurt my image.”

“What image?” Aubrey asks brightly while she bats her eyelashes. “The one in which you’re deeply in love with your wife and would do anything for her, including letting her have the wedding of her dreams?”

“I’m *not* wearing a pink tie,” he grouses.

“Fine. I suppose you could wear a white one.”

“I’ll be wearing a black tie,” he snaps, “with a black shirt, black pants, and a black suit jacket.”

Aubrey rolls her eyes. “At least you’re not insisting on that stupid red jacket of yours.”

“Stupid?! It’s premium leather. I paid over six thousand dollars for it.”

Aubrey winks at me. “Sounds like a waste of money, but whatever. Wear black, I don’t care. But you’d better look happy when you see me walking down the aisle. I expect tears of joy.”

“Likewise,” Ludo drawls before spinning on his heel and marching off.

Once he’s far enough away that he can’t hear, Aubrey laughs. “I knew he wouldn’t wear it when I bought it, but I just *had* to see his reaction. God, that was priceless.”

In her room, Aubrey shuts the door behind us. Nothing in here really reminds me of her. The bedspread is navy blue, the wood paneling is

beautiful but too dark, and the only bright things in here are the balcony doors and her clothes.

“I know,” she says with a sigh. “But I figured there’s no point in redecorating when I’m going to be gone so soon.”

“Fair.”

Quietly, Aubrey opens the drawer of her nightstand. “This is where the makeup bag is. Everything is already inside.” Moving to the doors that lead to her balcony, she gestures to the tree outside. “And for later tonight, I’m getting out of the house through here.”

“Can you make that climb?” I ask.

“In my sleep.” She opens the bottom drawer of her dresser. “We’re going to need some kind of signal. I don’t want to sneak out until I know Ludo has gone to bed, and I can’t call or message one of you. There can’t be any trace of communication between us.”

“Right. What’re you thinking?”

Aubrey pulls out a long red scarf from the drawer. “Ludo gave this to me soon after we solidified our engagement.”

I frown. We haven’t known each other long, but I’ve never seen Aubrey wear anything red. And looking into her open closet right now, most of her clothes are exactly what I’d expect—pastels.

“That’s about the face I made,” Aubrey says. “He could’ve spent two seconds asking about what colors I preferred, but no. He had to go with *his* color. It’s the perfect representation of our relationship. Might as well be instrumental in its ruination.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “Poetic justice at its finest.”

Aubrey nods. “I’ll hang it from my balcony when I’m ready to go. The guys have a distraction planned to clear the yard, right? There will be four

men watching the perimeter paired off together. The distraction will occupy at least two of them?”

“Correct.” We’ve been over most of this, but I’m glad Aubrey and I are going through it again. There’s no room for mistakes tonight.

She releases a long, slow exhale before placing the scarf on her dresser. “I can’t believe we’re almost there. I’m so close, Wren.”

Clasping our hands together, I squeeze gently. This might be the last moment Aubrey and I share alone, so I want to make the most of it. “I’m happy for you. Tonight is going to go perfectly, and you’ll get everything you want.”

Aubrey nods, and some of the hope glistening in her eyes transfers to me. “We all will. That’s the deal.”

I smile in agreement.

“Aubrey,” Marceline calls through the door as she knocks. “Some of the other bridesmaids are here. It’s time to start getting ready.”

“Be right there,” Aubrey calls before whispering to me, “Ready to turn Ludo’s world upside down?”

I square my shoulders. We’ve planned, we’ve prepared, and now it’s time to finish this. So I truly mean it when I whisper back, “Oh, I’m *so* ready.”

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Chapter Fifteen

Elliot

Sometimes, irony strikes at the oddest moments.

I've never seen a wedding as beautiful as Aubrey's and Ludo's. Every detail is attended to, every moment thought out to the fullest extent. The lights, the music, the color scheme—it's all perfect.

And also entirely fake.

Having the wedding ceremony in the library seemed like an odd idea until we entered the room. It's the perfect spot, considering it's already beautiful on its own. Rows and rows of old volumes and ornate bookshelves line the walls, and it creates an intimate, warm environment. It's exactly what Aubrey and Ludo need—the feeling of closeness.

Oliver adjusts his tie as we take our seats. "Axel is watching us."

"Then he'll be disappointed," Rhett says as he slips his left arm around Oliver's shoulders and his right one around me. "We're just three guys here for the wedding of two of our friends."

Inwardly, I cringe at the thought of Ludo as our friend. I'd rather stab myself than utter those words, but I nod. "No reason to suspect us at all."

Our plan is to stay in plain sight all evening. If Axel is suspicious of us, then he'll be watching us extra closely. And if he's watching us, then his eyes will be off our girl.

Wren. For a brief moment, my fist clenches, but Rhett squeezes my shoulder, and I force myself to relax. Since my panic attack a couple weeks ago, I've managed to get my anxiety under control. Mostly, anyway. Watching Wren dedicate herself to her training has soothed it some. She's come a long way in the past few weeks, and she's much more ready now.

The conversation between Ludo and Axel that Oliver overheard has helped, too. It's currently what I'm clinging to. Even if she's caught in the wrong hallway, she can feign confusion. It's a large enough mansion that I'm sure Ludo and his men are used to their guests getting turned around. And since they don't see Wren as a threat, everything will be fine.

She's safe. She's safe. She's safe.

I repeat those two words in my head until the ceremony starts. All the bridesmaids look nice, but once Wren walks down the aisle, I can't take my eyes off her. Neither can Rhett or Oliver.

"It's not fair," Oliver whispers, "that she looks so pretty but she's all the way over there."

I smile. I wish Wren was with us too, but I'm glad she got to spend today with Aubrey. Fake wedding or not, this is still an important day.

Wren must feel our gazes on her because she looks our way. She doesn't even seem surprised by the fact that all three of us are staring at her. Oliver blows her a kiss, and her smile widens just as the music changes.

Everyone stands, and we all turn to face the back of the room. Aubrey steps through the doors with her arm looped through her father's. She looks

beautiful with her hair up, except for a few curls to frame her face. The tiara sitting on top of her head sparkles in the sunlight.

“What a gorgeous dress,” someone murmurs.

I’m almost inclined to disagree. *Gorgeous* doesn’t fully encompass just how beautiful it is or how well it suits Aubrey. The bodice is covered in delicate lace that turns into sleeves that extend all the way to her wrists. As for her skirt, it’s layer upon layer of white tulle and more lace, all positioned to look like a cascade of graceful fabric.

The moment Aubrey’s eyes land on Ludo, her expression goes from happy to ecstatic. It’d be touching if I didn’t know it was all an act.

Once Aubrey is in front of Ludo, she hands her bouquet to one of her bridesmaids and immediately grabs both of Ludo’s hands. His smile is genuine—or at least it looks that way—as he mouths *I love you* to her.

It makes my stomach churn.

Thankfully, the ceremony doesn’t last for more than twenty minutes. I spend most of it watching Wren. She’s doing an excellent part of playing the enthusiastic bridesmaid, and I’m proud of her. The guys and I may have more pent-up hate toward Ludo than Wren does, but she’s still disgusted by him.

Once the bridal party has exited, we follow the crowd to the ballroom. I catch Axel watching us from the corner of my eye. *Good.* We have nothing to hide tonight. It’s all on Wren.

There doesn’t seem to be assigned seating, which is a relief. Between the large amount of people here and the fact that we’re in Ludo’s home, I’m sure Rhett’s about to burst. He’s doing an excellent job hiding it, but I know him well enough to not fall for his perfectly crafted mask of composure.

We find an empty table and claim some seats. Hopefully no one else will join us. Almost the second we're seated, the DJ starts announcing the bridal party and groomsmen. It's faster-paced than other receptions I've been to, but I'm not complaining. I forgot to grab a snack before leaving home, so the sooner we get to eat, the happier I'll be.

Wren walks in with the same man she walked down the aisle with, followed by other members of the bridal party, and then finally Aubrey and Ludo. They still appear to be as happy as ever, and the look of adoration on Aubrey's face has me frowning into my glass of water.

This is the only way Aubrey could secure her parents' safety, but she shouldn't've had to do this. It's not fair. At least she doesn't have to endure being Ludo's wife for much longer.

When our meal is served, Rhett barely touches his plate, while Oliver finishes his food in record time. It's a perfect picture of their differences—Rhett tends to lose his appetite when he's upset, and Oliver has always been a little bit of a stress eater.

"You guys okay?" I ask before popping another bite of food into my mouth.

"Perfect," Rhett replies lowly.

"I'm still hungry," Oliver says, eyeing Rhett's plate. "You gonna eat?"

With a shake of his head, Rhett pushes his food in front of Oliver. "Have at it. But slow down. You're going to give yourself a stomach ache."

"Joke's on you, I've had one for the past two hours," Oliver quips. Neither of us laugh, so he sighs. "Axel is still watching us. We have to act happy, or he'll suspect something."

"Fair point." I lean in, press my lips to his cheek for a moment, and then smile. "How's that?"

“If I keep getting kisses out of this, then much better.”

Rhett rolls his eyes, but the tiniest smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. “I sense an ulterior motive.”

“What?” Oliver paces a hand over his chest in mock shock. “Me? Trying to finagle affection from you? I’d never! How dare you accuse me like this.”

Rhett’s smile widens ever so slightly before he leans toward Oliver. “So you won’t be disappointed if I don’t kiss you?”

Oliver smirks. “We’ll never know, will we?”

Again, Rhett rolls his eyes, but he kisses Oliver on the cheek anyway. Oliver practically glows, and then he gasps with delight as he notices Wren heading our way.

“You three look like you’re having fun.” She drapes her arms around me from behind, and I inhale deeply. As that sweet, floral scent of hers fills my lungs, she nuzzles her nose against my cheek.

“It’d be better with you here,” Oliver replies. “You having a good time?”

“Mmhmm. We had a blast getting ready together. Aubrey’s friends seem nice.” She straightens and moves toward Oliver, and I immediately miss her warmth. “You look nice, O.”

Oliver smiles as she takes his hands in hers to look more closely at his rings. He painted his fingernails black, and that combined with his rolled-up sleeves keeps Wren staring for a moment longer than necessary.

“Do Rhett and Ell *not* look nice, princess?” Oliver asks with glittering eyes.

“What? Oh! No, you all look nice, I—Oliver is just . . .”

“It’s okay,” he says with a grin. “You can say I’m the hottest.”

“Ugh, you know that’s not what I meant! It’s just that—well, the rings. And the bracelets, and your . . . hands.” Her voice gets a little breathy at the end, and I can’t help my chuckle.

“I’m the hottest,” Oliver says confidently. “I think you all think so.”

Wren groans.

“You’re really not helping his ego, sweetheart,” Rhett says with a smirk.

“I’m not ranking you all by hotness,” Wren says with a jab to Oliver’s shoulder. “You wouldn’t rank me, Ell, and Rhett by hotness, would you?”

“Mmm. I suppose not. But I can definitely say you’re the prettiest.”

She rolls her eyes but doesn’t resist when he pulls her down for a quick kiss.

“Have you guys already done pictures?” I ask. “I was expecting a longer wait time between the ceremony and the reception kicking off.”

“Oh, yeah, pictures have been done for hours. God, it was *freezing.* This dress wasn’t meant to be worn outside in the winter. At least it’s fairly pretty for a bridesmaid’s dress.” Wren smooths her hands over the skirt of her dress as she looks down at the dusty pink material.

“I think it looks beautiful on you, princess,” Oliver tells her. “Don’t you agree, Rhett?”

Slowly, Rhett’s gaze travels up and down Wren’s body. “*You* look beautiful, sweetheart. The dress . . . It’ll look much better on my bedroom floor.”

“Rhett,” she gasps. “Someone is going to hear you.”

With an uncaring shrug, he pulls her into him until she loses her balance and falls directly into his lap. “You have a problem with everyone knowing who you belong to? Because I want to make it very, *very* clear.”

Wren stutters as she tries to find a reply. It doesn't matter, though, because Rhett cuts her off with a kiss. He keeps it short, but if the dazed smile on Wren's face is any indicator, it still has the desired effect.

"We, um." She gives her head a little shake to clear her mind. "Aubrey and Ludo are gonna have their first dance soon. And then the bridal party is supposed to join them on the floor. The guy I'm paired with would prefer to dance with his girlfriend, and I'd prefer to dance with one of you, so—"

"Oh, it should be Elliot. His suit matches the groomsmen's' the best." Oliver traces a finger down Wren's arm. "You doing okay so far?"

She nods. "I've been distracted enough that I haven't been able to worry. This is the first moment I've been able to step away all day, and I should probably get back so I can finish my food before the dancing starts."

"You can have my food," Oliver volunteers. Standing, he pulls out his chair and steps to the side. "I guess it's Rhett's, really, but he doesn't want it."

Wren looks reluctant to leave Rhett's lap, but she slides into Oliver's chair anyway. "You're not hungry?"

"I'll eat later," Rhett replies. "Have as much as you want."

Wren hesitates for a second, but when Rhett gives her a reassuring nod, she takes a few bites. I'm glad she's doing okay. It seems that her and Rhett fall into similar patterns when they're stressed, so it's a relief that she's eating.

As Oliver lowers himself into the chair on the other side of Rhett, the DJ announces Aubrey and Ludo's first dance. Wren groans and starts to eat faster. She's able to finish a decent amount of the food before the DJ asks the bridal party to join them.

“Jesus, that was fast.” Wren takes a couple gulps of water, dabs at her mouth with a napkin, and then stands. “Ready?”

“Whenever you are, love.”

As we pass by Oliver, Wren leans down and whispers something in his ear. Whatever it is, it makes him sit with a little more confidence. He kisses her cheek and watches with a proud look on his face as Wren takes my hand.

“What was that about?” I ask as she wraps her arms around my neck. My hands rest on her hips as we match the pace of the other couples on the floor.

With a quick glance toward our table, Wren says, “I just told him a couple of the bridesmaids think his makeup is hot. Did he put it on by himself? Or did one of you make him?”

“He did it all on his own.” I spin her around. “Although I helped him get one of his bracelets on. Damn clasp was so tiny. But I didn’t have to tell him to change or anything like that.”

“Really?” she whispers as her eyes flare with hope.

“Yeah,” I say softly. “I’m happy for him. Proud, too.”

Wren nods in agreement before settling her head against my chest.

I dip my head down and keep my voice low as I say, “Ludo’s right-hand man has been watching us all evening. He’s keeping most of his focus on me and the guys, so you should be in the clear, but keep an eye out for him, okay?”

Her arms tighten around my neck. “Got it.”

I hate that I’m scaring her, but she needs to know. “If you see him following you, the plan is off, okay? You get the makeup bag and give it to Aubrey. Forget about the safe.”

“Ell—”

“We’ll keep him away from you.” My lips brush against her hairline. “But you need to look out for him in case we can’t.”

“I will.”

The song comes to an end too soon, and the dance finishes with Ludo kissing Aubrey with a level of sweetness that I didn’t know he was capable of.

“She’s probably fantasizing about stabbing him right now,” Wren whispers. “She told me that’s what she does any time she has to touch him because it puts a genuine smile on her face.”

“It’d put a genuine smile on mine, too,” I mutter.

“I should go be with the other bridesmaids,” Wren says reluctantly. “I’ll see you . . . after.”

After.

My chest tightens. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. And I’ll be okay. Promise.” She squeezes my hand before we head our separate ways.

Everyone dances to a couple more songs, and Oliver pulls me back onto the floor when one of his favorites comes on. I try to ignore my mounting anxiety. The plan is for Aubrey to ask Wren to grab her makeup bag after cake is served, and that should be soon.

Aubrey and Ludo have started making their rounds, and I notice that they spend extra time with the Stallard’s’ political connections. It’s exactly what I expected them to do.

As for Axel, he’s divided his attention between watching us and watching Ludo. He’s not being subtle, but I suppose he has no reason to be. He

probably thinks the simple fact that we're being watched will deter us from trying anything tonight.

When the cake is served, I force myself to take a few bites. Out of the habit of always searching for her when we're in a room together, my eyes lock on Wren. She's sitting at her table, surrounded by bridesmaids and laughing. When Aubrey gets up and makes her way down the table, Wren's smile momentarily wavers. But just as quickly, it's back in place, and she nods enthusiastically when Aubrey says something to her.

This is it.

None of us watch Wren as she exits the ballroom. It'd be far too obvious, and we can't draw any extra attention to her. Instead, we focus on keeping our conversation light.

"God," Oliver groans once he's halfway done with his cake. "I love raspberry filling."

Without a word, Rhett slides his plate toward Oliver. His expression is grim, which is fairly normal for him when we get this far into a large event. Normally he would've stepped outside at least once or twice by now.

As if on cue, Rhett stands abruptly. "I need to get some air."

With a sigh, I say, "Just don't go too far."

He nods silently before walking off.

Oliver and I eat our cake as we watch everyone on the dance floor. He's nodding his head to the music, and I'm leaning back in my chair with a nonchalant expression on my face. By looking at us, no one would suspect what our partner is doing upstairs. It doesn't matter if I'm falling apart inside with worry.

After a song or two, Oliver reaches over and takes my hand. "I'm gonna head to the restroom."

Even though I try to stop it, I wince. “You’ll come right back?”

“No more going off on my own.” Oliver lifts my hand to his mouth and presses a kiss to my knuckles. “I promised you, Ell, and I meant it.”

Exhaling slowly, I nod. “Thank you.”

As I watch Oliver cross the ballroom, dread creeps through my veins. Axel is watching him suspiciously, and even once Oliver is in the bathroom, his expression stays hardened. It shouldn’t be a problem—I fully believe Oliver will stick to his promise—but I don’t like it.

Still, if Axel is focused on Oliver, then it means he’s far away from Wren. It’s the best-case scenario at the moment, even if I wish Axel’s attention was elsewhere.

In case someone is watching me, I don’t want to look like I’m nervously waiting for something to happen. So I pull out my phone and type a message.

Elliot: You okay?

Rhett: Just got overwhelmed. Is Wren back yet?

Elliot: No.

Rhett: If she’s not back in a couple minutes, we have a problem.

Elliot: I know.

Glancing at the clock on my phone, I frown. It’s already been fifteen minutes. The safe cracker takes some time, but not too much.

Where are you, love?

“Ell.”

I look up to see Oliver striding toward me with a worried expression on his face. A quick glance around the ballroom, and I realize why.

“Where the hell is Axel?”

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Chapter Sixteen

Wren

Retrieving the makeup bag from Aubrey's room is a breeze. I double-check that everything is inside before slipping into the hallway.

So far, I haven't encountered another person on the second floor. It doesn't seem like Axel followed me up, which is a relief. He's huge—and terrifying. Now all I have to do is get into the billiard room without being seen.

I resist the urge to clutch the makeup bag too tightly as I take a turn. Out of all the places I have to be tonight, this is the worst spot to get caught. From the main staircase, you have to walk right past Aubrey's bedroom to get here. I can always claim that I got turned around, but there's a chance whoever finds me will call bullshit.

Just look a little confused, I remind myself as I near the billiard room. *Like you're just really bad at following directions and don't know how you ended up here.*

My heart feels like it's going to beat its way out of my chest. The calming breaths I take do absolutely nothing, and holding the bag is the

only thing hiding how badly my hands are shaking.

You can do this, Wren. You have to.

I count the doors as I go, and I reach the billiard room without interruption. The place is eerily empty except for the music and laughter coming from the ballroom.

Aubrey stashed a pair of gloves in the makeup bag, so I put them on quickly. My hands are shaking as I unlock the door and slip inside the billiard room. Once I'm out of sight, I slump against the door and release a long, slow breath. Half of the dangerous part is over.

Not wanting to be in here any longer than I have to be, I get to work. Turning on the light would be too conspicuous, so I use the flashlight on my phone, careful not to point it at any of the windows.

I find the painting with ease. Aubrey said the hinges are on the left side, so I get a grip on the right side of the frame and tug. There's a slight resistance, but then it swings open. Elliot must be right about a magnet holding the unconnected side of it to the wall.

"Okay," I tell myself, my voice barely audible to my own ears. "You can do this. Just like you practiced."

As I remove the device from the makeup bag, I think I hear the faintest noise from the hallway. I freeze. It was so quiet that I'm not entirely sure I actually heard anything.

I don't move for a minute, listening for any indicators that someone is in the hallway, but there's only silence. Not even footsteps or the sound of a door opening or closing.

You just imagined it. Keep going.

The cracker fits over the dial exactly like it did at home. The magnets hold it in place, so I step back as it spins, working automatically to find the

correct combination.

I can barely breathe. It's a good thing I don't have to work the device myself because I can't stop my damn hands from trembling.

Why does it feel like I'm being watched?

"It's just your anxiety," I whisper to myself. Still, I shut off my phone's flashlight so the light isn't visible from the windows. As the darkness envelops me, my chest tightens.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. I gasp in short breaths of air as I feel around for the wall and press my back to it. It provides some semblance of a feeling of safety. When I close my eyes, I can pretend I'm standing anywhere other than exactly where I am.

There's nothing in the dark. You can't panic. Not when everyone's depending on you.

I'm not sure how long it takes for the telltale *click* of the safe unlocking to reach my ears. All I care about is that it gives me an excuse to turn my flashlight on, even if I have to be careful with where I aim it.

The hard drive is the only thing in the safe. I snatch it up and stuff it in the makeup bag before quietly closing the door. After taking the cracker off and putting it in the bag as well, I close the safe, swing the painting back into place, and breathe a sigh of temporary relief.

Now for the most nerve-racking part—leaving without being seen.

Tucking the makeup bag under my arm, I press my ear to the door. I can't hear much of anything, which is either perfect or disastrous.

Before opening the door, I turn the lock on the doorknob so I don't have to use the key in the hallway. I should've locked it the moment I came inside, and now I feel pretty damn stupid for not doing exactly that.

At least no one tried to come in. Focus on the positive, Wren.

I press my ear to the door again. It’s solid wood, which isn’t helpful at the moment. I’d prefer something thinner so sound could pass through easier.

After a couple seconds of silence, I square my shoulders. I can’t stand here all night listening. This is the best it’s gonna get. Slowly, I open the door and peek out.

Nothing.

That’s good. Get a move on.

I close the billiard room door behind me and creep back toward the main hallway. As I’m shoving my gloves in the makeup bag, footsteps sound from the direction I’m heading. Of course, they’re headed my way.

I dart back the way I came. For a second, I debate hiding in the billiard room, but then I hear the laughter of two men. They’re *way* too close for comfort and only coming nearer. I don’t have enough time to unlock the door and get back inside.

Running in heels on carpet feels as dangerous as it sounds, but I don’t have a choice. It’s either move quickly or get caught. I could always claim I got lost on my way downstairs, but this is the worst hallway for someone to find me in.

If I’m remembering the blueprints correctly—and I’d better be, considering how much time I spent studying them—I can make a turn up ahead that’ll get me out of sight. All it’ll take is a glance down this hallway, and I’m toast.

I reach the turn just in time and throw myself around the corner. My plan is to wait until the voices pass and then sneak back down the hallway, but I quickly realize I’m not going to be able to do that.

The voices—and the footsteps—are following me. The two men don't sound alarmed, so I don't think they spotted me. But they will if I don't get the hell out of here.

I take off, running through the mansion at as fast of a pace as I can manage in these damn heels. It puts some distance in between me and Ludo's men. Unfortunately, my current path is only bringing me closer to Ludo's office—the worst spot in the house to get caught. How the hell am I supposed to claim I got lost when I'm heading toward the other side of the mansion now?

Shit, shit, shit. How am I supposed to get out of this?

I rack my brain, thinking of another way to get back to where I need to go. But all I can think of is the second staircase that leads downstairs. It'll put me in the wrong section of the first floor, but it won't be as suspicious.

Thanks to Aubrey's request to keep security light, I shouldn't run into any more of Ludo's men up here. As long as I can stay far enough ahead of the two guys behind me until I get to the staircase, I should be golden.

Okay. Second staircase it is.

It's pretty much a straight shot from here. All I have to do is run for a minute or two. As long as I can make it before Ludo's men turn down this hallway, I'll be golden.

When I come up on the staircase, I almost cry with relief. The hallway opens up to a large balcony on my right with the steps after that. Below, there's a large foyer with a pair of French doors that lead into the greenhouse I remember seeing in the blueprints.

In the foyer, there's a man nervously pacing. I'm about to find a place to hide, but he turns, and our eyes lock.

Rhett. Oh, thank god.

“What are you doing on this side of the mansion?” he hisses. “Get down here.”

I step toward the stairs, but then I freeze. Someone is whistling. The tune is familiar, and I recognize it instantly as the same one I heard Ludo whistling when he left me in the pool that night in Florida.

It’s him. He’s going to catch me near his office, out of breath, with absolutely no reason to be over here. Oh no no no no no.

The whistling is getting closer. There’s definitely not enough time for me to get down the stairs before Ludo sees me.

Quickly, Rhett moves so he’s below the balcony. “Jump.”

“W-what?”

“Jump, Wren,” he whisper-shouts. “*Now.*”

My heart is beating wildly as I gather up the skirt of my dress. “You’ll catch me?”

“Always, sweetheart.”

The fall is barely even a full story, but it’s still intimidating. As I climb over the banister, I keep my focus on Rhett. *He won’t let me get hurt. I know he won’t.*

I take a shuddering breath before I let go.

For a split second, I’m falling, and then I’m in the safe hold of Rhett’s arms. He barely even grunts before steadying himself and setting me down. Somehow, I’m able to gain balance quickly, which is a miracle considering these heels.

Ludo’s whistling is much closer now—too close. There’s nowhere to hide. Getting caught in this area of his mansion isn’t as suspicious as getting caught upstairs, but we’re right by the steps, and—

“Just follow my lead,” Rhett murmurs, cradling my face with one hand and pulling me close with the other. His arm locks around my waist, and I don’t realize what he’s doing until his lips meet mine.

I let out a surprised squeak before almost dropping the makeup bag. Then I grab onto his suit jacket, stumbling when he walks me backward and into a wall.

“Rhett,” I gasp. He shoves my legs apart with his knee until his thigh is pressed tightly in between mine. The skirt of my dress pulls tight as I moan into his mouth.

His kiss is heated and greedy, and it’s almost enough to make me forget that it’s just a performance. One of his hands grips my waist as his tongue dances with mine. I let myself get lost in the kiss, in the way the scent of cedar and sage envelops me and his body shields me from view.

Ludo’s footsteps sound close, and then his whistling stops. There’s an unsurprised chuckle before he says, “Can’t keep your hands off each other for a single night, I see.”

I jump, but Rhett barely moves back at Ludo’s words. His eyes hold a warning for me: play it cool. Problem is, my nerves are so frayed, I don’t know if I can.

“Saw her walk by and had to steal her away for a minute.” Rhett manages a cool smile before turning to face Ludo. “Suppose I should let you go, though.”

“Yeah, Aubrey needs me. Makeup stuff.” I gesture with the hand holding the bag. “I should get back to her.”

With an almost bashful look, Rhett leans in and kisses me on the cheek. “Sorry for distracting you. Couldn’t help myself.”

“Oh, I’m sure Aubrey understands,” Ludo says, and I hate the way his eyes track me as I step away.

As I move toward the ballroom, I stare at the ground, too afraid my facial expressions will give something away. Even once I’m out of sight, I don’t look up. Rhett kissing me like that left my brain all fuzzy, and Ludo catching us only threw me off more. I have to find a way to calm myself down before I get back to the ballroom.

My lack of awareness is probably what leads me to walk directly into a large man. As I stumble backward from the impact, I meet Axel’s hard glare. My stomach drops.

“What the hell are you doing over here?” His eyes narrow with suspicion as he takes me in. “You’re a little far from the party, aren’t you?”

“I was just grabbing Aubrey’s makeup bag.” The words roll off my tongue with ease, and I mentally thank myself for practicing so many times. “And then I got . . . distracted.”

“Sure,” he says dryly, and then he snatches the bag from my hands.

Shit.

“Aubrey needs that,” I snap. When I try to grab it back, Axel holds it over my head. “Hey!”

“Axel,” Ludo says from behind me. He’s walking briskly with Rhett by his side. “What’re you doing?”

“I saw that these two were missing.” Axel gestures between the two of us. “There’s something off here, boss.”

“You’re focusing on the wrong people.” Ludo plucks the bag from Axel’s hands. “I just caught them making out by the stairs. That’s all.”

“Then check the bag,” Axel grits out. “If it’s full of makeup, then it’ll only prove their innocence.”

“All you’re proving,” Ludo says menacingly, “is that I made a mistake in making you my most trusted employee. Are you really doubting my judgment?”

“You only tested the men.” Axel levels me with a glare that has goosebumps covering my skin. “I still stand by my idea that she could be working separately from them.”

“What?” I ask, and I barely have to feign confusion. “Working separately from them how? I’m only grabbing Aubrey’s bag like she asked me to.”

“What’s he accusing us of, Ludo?” Rhett steps close enough that my fingers brush against his thigh. It doesn’t put him between me and Axel, but the move is still clear. To get to me, he’ll have to go through Rhett first.

“A problem that resolved itself.” Shoving the bag into my hands, Ludo walks back the way we came. “Axel, come with me. Wren, go see my wife.” He pauses and turns to Rhett. “No more distractions.”

Without another word, I grab Rhett’s hand and pull him toward the ballroom. That was close. *Way* too close. Like, Elliot-is-going-to-freak-out-and-lock-me-in-a-safe-room kind of close. But at the same time, this whole situation is so ironically comical that I’m close to laughing.

“Wren.” Rhett tugs on my hand once we’ve put enough distance between us and Ludo. He turns me toward him and frames my face between his hands. “Are you all right?”

I keep my voice as low as I can considering I’m on the verge of . . . *something.* Whether it’s tears or laughter, I don’t know. “Did Ludo just hand me the very thing that’s going to destroy him?”

The corners of Rhett’s lips tip up. “Yeah. Fuck, he did, didn’t he?”

“And we . . . did we just almost die?”

“Most definitely.” He lifts my face with a bent knuckle under my chin. “But we didn’t. At least for right now, focus on that.”

I can do that—not that I have much of a choice.

His lips meet mine in a chaste kiss before he whispers, “Go. This isn’t over yet.”

I rush back to the ballroom and spot Oliver and Elliot caught in conversation with Mr. Stallard. They both seem perfectly relaxed, but I don’t miss the relief on their faces when they see me. I blow them a kiss before heading back to the bridal table.

Aubrey is right where I left her, talking to a couple of her parents’ friends. When she laughs, it’s in a much more restrained way than she does when she doesn’t have to worry about her family’s reputation.

When I hover close by, she wishes them a lovely evening before we slip into the room where we got ready. Aubrey doesn’t let down her perfectly-happy-and-in-love persona until she’s double checked that we’re alone.

Letting out a large sigh, she collapses onto the sofa. “Oh. my. god. I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to punch someone in the face more.”

“What did they say?”

“What? Oh! No, the Larsons are fine. A little dull, but that’s on brand for my parents’ taste in friends.” She rolls her eyes. “No, I mean Ludo. I’ve had to introduce him to every single one of my parents’ friends that he deemed worthy of a connection. Did you know he researched every person on the guest list? *And* made a couple requests. Fucking asshole.”

“It’ll all be worth it,” I remind her. “For your parents.”

With a sigh, she nods. “They haven’t been as worried lately, and I think it’s because they feel safer. I hope I’m not about to add on to their stress.”

I sit next to her so we can speak as quietly as possible. “When are you going to contact them?”

“Hopefully tomorrow night. I have a long flight tonight to get to California, and then Sparrow will help me settle in at my new place. She normally doesn’t take her clients that far, but considering who I’m running from, she wants to make sure everything goes perfectly.”

“You nervous?”

“Nah. I trust Sparrow. She has everything worked out. I can only contact my parents in specific ways so nothing can be traced, but once I’m out, I should be perfectly safe. And quite happy.”

Taking her hand and squeezing, I say, “And you’ll have nothing to worry about here. The guys are already working on aligning themselves with your parents, so once . . .” I glance around. “Once everything is taken care of, they’ll make sure nothing happens to them. No matter what.”

“Thank you,” she says softly. “Really. I wouldn’t’ve been able to do this unless I found a way to protect them.”

“Thank *you.*” I nod to the makeup bag, which is sitting in my lap. “With this, I think we’ll be able to end things quickly.”

With a tilt of her head, she asks, “And then?”

“And then . . . and then we live happily ever after, I suppose.”

Aubrey laughs. “You know, I used to think that was bullshit. Life is so *stressful.* But watching the four of you, everything started to make more sense. You guys have found a sort of happily ever after in the midst of so much pain. I’ve never seen a love so deep.”

“I used to think something similar. My mom and her husband never truly seemed happy, you know? And I never felt it in any past relationships. But now, with these three . . . everything just clicks.”

“They love you so much it confused me at first,” she says. “Now it’s my goal to find someone—or multiple people, I suppose—who look at me the way you four look at each other.”

I grin. “Just be careful. You might end up getting more than you bargained for.”

She snorts. “No kidding. Look at you—a normal girl who somehow ended up with three revenge-bent hitmen.”

“Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined myself here,” I say with a laugh. “But I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Ugh!” Aubrey flings her arms around me. “I’m going to miss you so much. I promise I’ll write. Maybe we can even talk on the phone once in a while. But promise you’ll write me back?”

“I promise.”

There’s a knock on the door, and after Aubrey calls out, it swings open. Ludo steps through with his hands in his pockets and a scowl on his features.

“What are you doing in here?”

“Wren was fixing my makeup,” Aubrey replies lightly. “And then we got distracted. Girl talk and all that. Do you need something?”

“Yes,” he says exasperatedly. “I need to be seen with my wife. We should dance together.”

“We already danced.”

“Well, we should do it again.” He steps closer so no one overhears his vexed tone. “You and I both need this to work, but it won’t if we don’t act accordingly. Get up. We’re dancing.”

“No, we’re not.” Aubrey stands and smooths her skirt. “We can talk to people, drink champagne, laugh, and act like we’re head over heels. But

I’m not dancing with you again. You’re horrible at it.”

Ludo jerks his head back like he’s been slapped. It looks like he’s about to fire back a retort, but there’s another knock on the door. One of the Stallard’s friends peeks in—a woman Ludo has been trying to kiss up to the most, I think. If I remember correctly, she’s an influential judge.

“Oh perfect, you’re both in here,” she says as she steps inside. Her pale cheeks are flushed from a night of dancing, but her light brown hair is still pulled back in a sleek French twist. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Bernadette,” Aubrey says delightedly. “Not at all. Are you enjoying yourself?”

“I am, yes. You planned a beautiful reception. And the colors you chose—such a lovely shade of pink, although I can’t say I’m surprised. You have the best taste.”

“That’s such a compliment coming from you.” Aubrey presses a hand to her heart like she’s truly touched. “Thank you. Oh—and where are my manners? Bernadette, this is Wren Taylor, one of my bridesmaids. She’s partners with a few men who regularly work for Ludo.”

“So lovely to meet you,” Bernadette says with a practiced smile. She extends her hand, and we shake briefly. “But unfortunately, I can’t stay. One of my kids got sick, so I have to get going. I just wanted to say goodbye first and congratulate you again. Aubrey, I wish you the best.”

“Oh, thank you so much for coming.” Aubrey draws Bernadette into a hug. “It means a lot.”

“Happy to be here. You’re a beautiful bride, Aubrey.” After a peck on the cheek, Bernadette turns and gives Ludo a smile that’s barely warmer than chilling.

“It was nice meeting you,” Ludo says, holding his arm out for a handshake.

“Yes,” Bernadette says slowly, looking at his hand but not taking it. “It was . . . something.” Turning back to Aubrey, she beams. “I hope you have a lovely honeymoon, dear. I’m sure I’ll hear all about it from your mother. Take lots of pictures, all right?”

“Oh, we’re actually doing a no-technology honeymoon,” Aubrey says as she gives Ludo a dreamy smile. It’s startlingly convincing. “No phones, no cameras, no anything. Just the two of us with each other for a whole week.”

“That sounds wonderful! I love that idea. Well, we’ll just have to get together some time so you can tell me all about it.” She moves to leave, but at the door, Bernadette turns. Something like concern flickers in her eyes. “Aubrey, dear. If there’s *anything* you ever need from me, I’m just a call away. You know that?”

“Thank you,” Aubrey says. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Once she’s gone, Ludo works his jaw. “She doesn’t like me.”

“She has an excellent bullshit detector.” As Aubrey says it, she gives him a pointed stare.

“I need her to like me,” he grits out.

“Try actually being likable, then,” she replies sweetly as she links her arm with his. “Now come along. We have people to impress.”

He doesn’t budge when Aubrey pulls him toward the door. “You’re not hearing me, *darling*. If she doesn’t like me, I’ll have to resort to less-than-savory methods to get what I want. Trust me, you won’t like them.”

My stomach turns. Is he talking about Benny?

Rolling her eyes, Aubrey sighs out, “Fine. We’ll schedule a dinner with her sometime. Us, my parents, and her and her husband. But there’s nothing

you can do about it tonight, so come on. Unless you've changed your mind about needing to be seen with me."

After straightening his already-perfect tie, Ludo wipes the scowl off his face and replaces it with a charming smile. "Nice try, but neither of us are getting out of this."

Aubrey rolls her eyes at me as Ludo tugs her out of the room. As she turns away, I'm just able to catch her slipping on a mask of pure joy. She does it so naturally, and after meeting her parents and the people they associate with, I understand why. Aubrey doesn't have a choice. Not until she disappears, anyway.

Plopping back onto the couch, I run my fingers over the makeup bag. Aubrey upheld her end of the deal, and now it's time for us to do the same. Everything is ready, so at this point, it's just a waiting game. And then . . .

I gulp. And then it's time to end this once and for all.

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Chapter Seventeen

Rhett

The rest of the reception is a blur. By the time we're saying goodbye to Aubrey and Ludo and wishing them a happy honeymoon, I can barely focus. Between the pounding music, the flashing lights, and the fact that we're currently at my sister's murderer's wedding, I'm shutting down fast.

The second we step out into the night air, my senses come back to me in phases. First, the cold hits my skin and burns in my throat as I suck in a deep breath. Second, the warmth of Oliver's hand in mine registers in my brain. When I look over, he's watching me quietly as we move to Elliot's SUV. He smiles, and it's the first truly genuine one of the day.

That's when the third phase hits—relief mixed with a shred of hope. I hold it close to my heart until we're shut in the car with me and Oliver in the backseat.

"You have it?" Elliot asks as he starts the engine.

"Buried in the bottom of my bag." Wren says it like she doesn't believe the words coming out of her mouth. "I almost got caught. God, it was so

close. But then Rhett was there, and . . .” She turns in her seat to look at me. “You knew exactly what to do.”

We did it. Fuck, she *did it.*

“You would’ve managed,” I say thickly.

“Seatbelt,” Oliver says, and I don’t realize he’s speaking to me until he reaches across my body and buckles me in.

“What happened?” Elliot asks as he pulls out of our parking spot and heads for home. He’ll have to turn around in a minute, but just in case we’re being watched or followed, we have to proceed like normal.

As Wren explains everything that went down, I close my eyes and focus on my breathing. Oliver’s fingers brush against mine on the seat. It’s a question—one he’s asked many times without uttering a single word.

Shakily, I intertwine my fingers with Oliver’s. His thumb rubs over my skin, and I let the touch ground me.

After a minute, Elliot turns us around so we’re heading toward our true destination. Last year, we bought a house closer to Ludo’s home. We weren’t sure if we’d ever need it, but it’s proving useful tonight.

When she’s ready to sneak out, Aubrey will give us the signal, but it’ll be hours from now. It’s only nine thirty, and Ludo doesn’t go to bed until after midnight.

“Aubrey said she’ll hang a red scarf from her balcony when she’s ready,” Wren says.

“We’ll have to move quickly from there.” Elliot’s fingers tap against the steering wheel. “Are we all good to stick with our current plan?”

“Oh, definitely,” Oliver says, and it may be dark, but I can hear the smile in his voice.

It’s not long before we’re pulling into the garage that’s attached to the house. The two cars we’ll use tonight are already here. One is Finn’s and the other is ours, but neither of them can be traced back to us. If one of Ludo’s men catches a license plate number, it won’t do them much good in finding us.

We pile out of the SUV and into the house. It’s not as large or extravagant as home, but it’s still nice. There isn’t much furniture-wise since we’re rarely here, but there’s a dining room table, a couch or two, and a couple beds upstairs.

After rummaging through her bag, Wren pulls out the hard drive and the safe cracker. “You want this now?”

“Yes.” Elliot takes the drive and sits at the table. He brought his laptop over the other day so he could start working on cracking the password tonight. This isn’t the first time we’ve had to break into a device like this, so we already have access to the software to help us.

“I’m gonna shower,” Wren says. “Can someone help me with my dress?”

“Of course,” I reply.

We leave Elliot and Oliver in the kitchen. Upstairs, Wren enters the first bathroom she finds and turns on the shower. With a sigh, she faces the mirror and leans against the counter.

“You still doing okay?” I settle my hands on her hips and catch her gaze in the mirror. She looks exhausted.

“I keep replaying everything in my head,” she says quietly. “Part of me wonders if I should’ve let myself get caught and just pretended that I got lost. Heading to the other side of the mansion was reckless. And running into Ludo like that was terrifying. If it hadn’t been for his ego, we’d all be . . .” She grimaces.

I’m grateful she doesn’t finish that sentence. With a kiss to the top of her hair, I murmur, “I used to do that, too.”

“Do what?”

“Run through a job we’d just finished and think about everything that could’ve gone wrong. I still catch myself doing it every once in a while. It doesn’t do any good, though.”

Silently, Wren nods. Her gaze falls to the counter in front of her.

“Hey.” I wait until she’s looking at me again to continue. “What matters is that you did it. You made a split-second decision, and it ended up working out just fine. We have the hard drive now—because of *you.*”

She spins around so she’s facing me. “And because of you. If you hadn’t been there to catch me, I don’t know what I would’ve done.”

I shake my head. “You would’ve managed. Ludo is confident in his perception of you. Even on that side of the mansion, I’m sure you could’ve lied your way out of it. Otherwise, Ludo would’ve had to admit he was wrong about you—and he hates admitting he’s wrong.”

At that, a smile forms on her features, even though it’s faint. “To his detriment.”

I kiss her lightly. “And to our benefit.”

With a tired smile, she turns around, and I unzip her dress. It falls to the floor, and I take in Wren’s mostly naked body.

“I was right,” I muse as I lean against the closed door.

“What?”

“The dress. It looks much better on the floor.”

Wren rolls her eyes, but it doesn’t hide her pleased smile. “Are you joining me?”

“Do you mind?”

She begins unbuttoning my shirt. “I’d prefer it.”

I empty my pockets, setting everything on the counter before pulling the rest of my clothes off. I was hoping she’d agree. If I don’t wash Ludo off me, my skin will be crawling all night.

The water is blissfully hot, and it warms up the small room quickly. We take turns scrubbing ourselves clean and rinsing the soap from our bodies. Any chance Wren gets, she reaches out and touches me, even if it’s only for a second. I do the same to her.

Ever since Elliot pointed it out a few weeks ago, I’ve noticed that I’ve been able to handle touch more often than not. There are still times when I can’t, and I thought for sure tonight would be one of them, but I guess I was wrong. Not only do I want the comfort that comes along with being touched, but it sends warmth through me instead of cold, hard dread.

I’ve tried, but I can’t pinpoint what exactly has made it easier for me. Maybe adding Wren into our relationship forced me to confront things I was avoiding. Or it could be that we’re finally making solid progress toward putting Sammy’s killer in the ground.

Whatever it is, as I lean down and capture Wren’s mouth in a kiss, I couldn’t be more grateful. I press her into the wall of the shower, and she shudders at the coldness of the tiles against her back.

So much has happened in the past weeks—in the past months. And at every turn, Wren has accepted every part of me. Even the broken, ugly pieces of me that I thought would repulse her or scare her away.

I love you, Wren, and I promise one day I’ll tell you.

The kiss stays gentle and almost tentative until Wren slips her tongue into my mouth. I groan, grabbing onto her hips and stroking her tongue with my own.

My dick is fully hard now, pressed up against her stomach, so I know she feels it. One of her hands falls between us, and she strokes my cock lightly.

My breath catches in my throat. I've been craving her touch ever since I pinned her against the wall during the reception. Waiting until now has been torture.

As I groan into Wren's mouth, I move my hips back to give her more room. She whimpers when I trace my fingers down her body until I reach between her legs. Just as I hoped, she's wet, and not just from the shower.

Our gazes lock while I stroke her clit. So many emotions are swirling in Wren's eyes. Her lips part, and for a second, I'm afraid she's about to say the words I know she's been holding back for weeks.

Maybe she sees the dread in my eyes, or maybe I just misread her, but she doesn't say anything. She just moans and leans her head against the wall.

Relief fills me. I kiss her as I gently rub her clit, but the water quickly washes away any natural lubricant, so there's more friction than I figure is comfortable. "I need to get you out of this damn shower."

She reaches over and shuts it off. Water droplets form on her skin, and I watch as they run down her body. Only when her fingertips feather down my chest and stomach do I realize she's doing the same thing to me.

With a groan, I step out of the shower and grab two towels. I dry myself off quickly, only taking my eyes off Wren when I absolutely have to. She dries herself off more thoroughly, and every movement makes my mouth water.

Gently, she pats at her hairline with her towel. She didn't want to deal with wet hair this late at night, so she didn't wash it, but some of it still got wet when she washed her face.

“You’re beautiful,” I murmur.

Her smile lights up the small room, and I tug her closer and press my lips to her neck. When her head falls back and she lets out a soft moan, it only eggs me on. I take her towel and toss it onto the floor before lifting her into my arms and setting her on the counter.

Wren doesn’t wait. With one hand behind her for balance, she wraps the other around my cock and strokes.

“Fuck, just like that, sweetheart.” I curl two fingers inside of her, and a deep satisfaction comes over me as her eyelids flutter closed.

Wren moans as I use my thumb on her clit. She does her best to sit up and bring her lips closer to mine, and I’m happy to lean down and meet her. My free hand cups the back of her head, and I fuse my mouth to hers in a hard, controlling kiss.

I add more pressure with my fingers, eliciting a sharp gasp from Wren. *Fuck yes.* I want all her attention right now. I want all of *her.*

We continue just like that until she comes all over my fingers. Her little whimpers cause my dick to grow impossibly harder. Just as I’m about to remove her hand so this doesn’t end before I want it to, she breaks off our kiss.

Wren moves her hand away herself as she searches the counter. My confusion only grows as I hear the clatter of metal.

“Eyes on me, sweetheart.” I curl my fingers into her again.

With a groan, Wren turns back to face me. My knife is in her hand, and she presses it into my palm.

“Show me I belong to you,” she whispers. “Show me I’m yours.”

I swear, my heart *actually* skips a beat. As I close my fingers around the knife, I search her eyes, unsure of what I’m even looking for. I figured we’d

reach this point eventually. Oliver told me about her discovering his scar and how eager she looked.

“I can take it,” she says, sensing my hesitation.

I open the knife, watching her eyes flare as she takes it in. Slowly, I move it closer, until the flat of the blade is resting against her collarbone. She doesn’t move—barely breathes—but her face lights up.

“You want my mark on you, sweetheart?” I ask lowly. Making sure not to cut her, I move the knife down her chest.

Her nod is sincere. “I need it.”

Stepping back, I look her over. She really, truly seems to want this, so I grab a bottle of rubbing alcohol from the closet behind me. While I clean the knife, Wren watches with fascination.

“Do you have a preference for where?” I ask her.

“Ummm.” She looks over her body before her fingers graze over the top of her thigh. “Here?”

“And you’re sure? It’ll hurt.”

“I want it.” She adjusts herself so she’s sitting in a more stable position. “And I trust you.”

I watch her for a second, waiting for the fear to show up in her eyes, but it never comes. After a deep breath, I kiss her gently. Her trust is a gift. Sometimes I wonder if I deserve it, but she’s given it to me regardless.

“Make sure you stay still,” I tell her as I hold her leg down with one hand.

Wren gasps as the blade breaks her skin, but she doesn’t flinch. I don’t cut deeply—in fact, I keep it as shallow as possible. The knife is sharp enough that as I carve a small heart into her skin, I barely have to apply any

pressure. It most likely won't scar, but I think for her first time, that's probably for the best.

Blood wells from the cut and runs down her leg. Once I'm finished, I set the knife on the other side of the sink. Wren is staring at her thigh, and her lips are slightly curved upward in a satisfied smile.

"It's perfect," she whispers.

I lick up some of the blood before it drips onto the counter. Then Wren tugs me up, pulling me into a wordless kiss that sends a shudder through my body. When she pulls away, her gaze drops to her cut again, and she swipes a finger over the trail of blood.

Before I can ask her what she's doing, she gently traces a small heart on my bare chest. Her voice is soft as she looks up at me and says, "Now you have my mark, too."

My heart races as she leans in and kisses the spot right next to the little drawing. Never in a million years would I have expected Wren would do something like that, but she wants it just as much as I do.

"Sweetheart," I murmur as I cup her cheek. I'm at a loss for words, so all I can do is stare at her and hope she understands what I wish I could say.

When her hand wraps around my dick, I lower my gaze to watch. As she strokes, I groan. There was still a little blood on her finger, and now it's on my cock.

"Fuck me," she whispers. "Now, Rhett."

After sliding into her, I take hold of her legs and spread them farther open. Wren moans as I bottom out inside of her. I hold myself there for a second and press my lips to her forehead. We've barely started, but I'm already breathing hard.

“Wren.” Her name is heavy on my tongue. This close to her, my thighs are pressed against hers. When I pull out, blood covers a patch of my skin. I slam into her again, groaning at the sight.

Wren’s cry echoes through the room as she grabs onto my shoulder. I press small circles to her clit with my thumb. Her eyes flutter closed, and she tips her head back with a blissful expression on her face.

“My beautiful whore,” I murmur.

Wren gasps for air as she clings to me. I grab her jaw, keeping it open as I lean down and spit on her tongue. Her eyes fly open, and I thrust into her harder as she swallows.

“Such a good girl,” I tell her.

When Wren comes, she pulls me with her, and I capture her cries in a heated, hazy kiss. My mind goes blank for a second, and when we break off the kiss, it takes a moment for me to catch my breath.

Wren’s eyes are bright as she watches me pull out of her. Her hand runs down my arm as my gaze snags on the blood still on her thigh. For the most part, the heart I carved into her leg has stopped bleeding, but we can’t leave it like that.

I give myself a minute before opening the cabinet below the sink and pulling out one of the many first aid kits we have stashed throughout the house. “We need to deal with your cut. Don’t want it getting infected.”

Wren stays quiet while I wipe up the blood and clean the cut. By the time I’m done bandaging it, she’s back to taking deep, even breaths. “I liked that,” she says when I step back.

“Liked what?”

“Everything. The way you cut into me, how it felt, what it means . . .” Her fingers trace around the bandage before she lifts her gaze to meet mine.

“It felt special. Important. Like I really do belong to you.”

“Or—” The words catch in my throat.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I give her a smile before helping her off the counter, but the words continue echoing in my mind.

Or that I belong to you.

. . .

By the time Elliot breaks into the hard drive, we need to head back to Ludo’s mansion. Our plan only requires one of us plus Finn, but having backup never hurts. Elliot and Oliver both leave together in the first car, and Wren and I follow farther behind in the second.

Finn is already there when we get into our positions just after midnight. Ell and O are parked on the service road that runs on the side of Ludo’s property, and Finn is a couple houses down on the main road. We’re behind him, which is where we’ll stay unless we’re needed.

Now it’s a waiting game. Ludo should be in bed, and according to Aubrey, there should be a shift change soon. Once it’s underway, she’ll notify Elliot and Oliver, and they’ll notify us.

Wren jumps when Finn’s voice comes through our earpieces.

“Anything yet?” he asks.

“Nothing,” Elliot replies.

I glance down the street, but it doesn’t reveal anything. The stone wall surrounding Ludo’s property is too tall for me to see.

“What if they already had their shift change?” Wren asks me.

“Aubrey would’ve found a way to tell us.”

The wait is torture, but after another half hour, Elliot says, “She just hung the scarf from her balcony. Finn, you ready?”

“Absolutely.”

I barely hear the low rumble of Finn’s vehicle starting. He keeps his lights off as we watch the driveway’s gate carefully. Once it opens, a car’s headlights shine through—from one of Ludo’s men heading home for the night—and Finn takes off.

Just as the car is halfway through the gate, Finn slams straight into it. Wren cringes at the sound of crunching metal and breaking glass.

For a few seconds, nothing happens, and I’m worried Finn misjudged his pace. But his passenger door opens, and when he climbs out, he looks relatively unharmed. His shoulder will probably be sore tomorrow and he might have a mild case of whiplash, but he’ll be fine.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Finn shouts as he gestures toward his vehicle. “Have you never heard of looking both ways?”

The other guy gets out just as some of Ludo’s men run over to the gate. Relief floods me when I count four extra men. Just as we hoped, they all rushed to the scene.

“What happened?” one of them asks. “Are you okay?”

“He just . . . he came out of nowhere. I don’t know how I missed you, man.”

“Don’t know how you missed me?” Finn yells. “Look at the front of my car. This is thousands of dollars of damage! That’s the best you’ve got?”

“He’s really laying it on thick,” Wren mutters.

“The angrier he is, the more distracted everyone will get,” I say.

Something of a yelling match ensues. A couple lights turn on in the house, and after a few minutes, a tall figure marches through the gate. Axel.

“What the hell are you doing?” he snaps to the guys surrounding the cars. “No one’s watching the back of the house if all four of you are standing around up here.”

“Oh—right. Sorry, sir.”

“You two, start cleaning up all this glass. And you two, get back to your posts. *Now.”*

All four men scramble to obey.

I glance at the clock on the dashboard. It’s barely been five minutes. In theory, it’s enough time, but Oliver is supposed to let us know when they’re on their way back to the house.

“You’ve got two guys heading toward the back of the house,” I say into the little mic clipped onto my coat. “Is Aubrey in the clear yet?”

As we wait for a response, Axel and Finn size each other up. This is the moment I’ve been worried about the most. Finn runs in different circles than us, so we were mostly sure Ludo’s men wouldn’t recognize him. Axel is the most likely to.

“We can get insurance companies involved if you’d prefer,” Axel says, his voice lacking recognition, “or we can handle this off the record.”

“I’m not paying a fucking dime,” Finn growls. “This idiot pulled out right in front of me.”

Axel turns to the other driver. “Is that true?”

“I . . . I guess, yeah. Sorry, sir.”

Why isn’t anyone answering?

Wren is giving me a look of absolute terror when Oliver’s voice finally comes through.

“Just got to the car,” he says while panting. “Heading back to the house now.”

“Thank god,” Wren whispers as she slouches in her seat.

I breathe out a sigh of relief. “We’ll join you soon.”

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Chapter Eighteen

Oliver

We don’t have any issues getting Aubrey off the mansion’s property. Aubrey has already untied her scarf and stashed it back inside. Once we hear the sounds from the crash out front, Aubrey appears on her balcony, staying low. She doesn’t move for a minute, probably waiting for Ludo’s men to run to the front of the house.

My heart is in my throat as she starts climbing down the tree. Soon, she’s low enough that we can’t see her over the wall, and we move closer. The side yard isn’t very big, so Aubrey doesn’t have far to run.

“Be ready,” Elliot says lowly. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

I nod, not wanting to make any extra noise.

The wall is short enough that Elliot can jump up and grab the top of it. He hauls himself up and over to the other side. It only takes a few seconds before I hear a whispered conversation on the other side of the wall.

“On the count of three,” Elliot says lowly before he counts.

Aubrey grunts, and her hands grasp the top of the wall as Elliot gives her one last push. Once she gets her legs over, I help her down.

Rhett’s voice comes through my earpiece. “You’ve got two guys heading toward the back of the house. Is Aubrey in the clear yet?”

Shit.

“C’mon.” I grab Aubrey’s hand and drag her to the car. She throws herself into the backseat before closing the door quietly. When I look back, Elliot has just made it over the wall. He runs to the car, and we both get in.

“Just got to the car,” I tell Rhett. “Heading back to the house now.”

“We’ll join you soon.”

Elliot starts the car and drives down the service road, heading away from Ludo’s mansion. We both keep checking behind us, but no one follows.

Aubrey laughs. “Oh my god. I can’t believe I did it. Thank you guys so much.”

“Thank *you,*” Elliot says. “I barely had time to look through the hard drive, but it’s exactly what we need. Between the IRS and the FBI, Holloway’s businesses will be tied up for a long time.”

“I can’t wait to hear all about it,” Aubrey says. “Wren and I are going to keep up some form of contact with each other.”

My heart warms. I like how much Wren and Aubrey have taken to each other. They both need the friendship that the other provides.

As we pull up to the safe house, I spot a dark gray sedan parked on the road. The driver’s side door opens when we pull into the driveway, and a plus size woman with deep brown skin gets out. She pulls all her locs over one shoulder before giving us a quick wave.

Aubrey squeals with excitement. “That’s her!”

The moment we’re parked in the garage, Aubrey gets out of the car. I’m barely able to stop her from barreling down the driveway.

“You need to stay out of sight,” I tell her. “We all do.”

I usher her inside the house. After a minute, Elliot and Sparrow follow, shutting the door behind them.

“Where are the others?” Sparrow asks as she glances around the room.

“On their way,” Elliot says. “Should be here any minute.”

Aubrey can’t seem to hold herself back any longer. She throws her arms around Sparrow and squeezes. “I can’t believe I’m really doing this. Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“You’re the one who made it happen.” Sparrow’s brown eyes soften as she steps back and holds Aubrey at arm’s length. “Although I stick by my original statement that leaving that bastard at the altar would’ve been much funnier.”

Aubrey snorts. “I would’ve if I could’ve.”

The door opens, and a relieved “Oh, thank fuck,” leaves my mouth before I can stop it. Rhett and Wren step through, and Rhett hits the button to close the garage doors so no one can spot our cars.

I didn’t realize how anxious I was until Wren wraps me up in her arms. I’ve been so focused on making sure Elliot was okay that my own emotions took a backseat. Now that we’re all safe—even if it’s only until we enact the rest of our plan—it feels like a fifty-pound weight has been lifted from my chest.

Subconsciously, I’m aware that I’m squeezing Wren too tightly, but I can’t bring myself to stop. Tears spring into my eyes, and I bury my face in her neck.

“Oliver,” Wren chokes out. “Can’t—can’t breathe.”

Blinking rapidly, I loosen my hold on her. “I was worried about you.”

Sparrow glances at her phone. “I’m sorry to break up the reunion, but Aubrey, we’ve got a flight to catch.”

Aubrey's face falls. "I guess this is it, huh?"

"Guess so," Wren mutters.

Gently, Rhett pulls me away from Wren so she can hug Aubrey. I lean into him, and when my head hits his chest, that familiar scent of cedar and sage soothes my soul.

"I'm gonna miss you," Wren says.

"Maybe we'll be able to see each other someday," Aubrey says with a hopeful glance at Sparrow.

She frowns. "Maybe. I trust these four to keep your identity and location a secret, but we still need to be careful. The fewer connections to your past life, the better."

"Well, in case we never manage . . ." Aubrey leans in and kisses Wren on the cheek. "I know you'll have a beautiful life." Turning, she looks at the rest of us. "All of you. I'm happy you guys have each other."

"You'll write as soon as you can?" Wren asks.

"As soon as I can."

Reluctantly, Aubrey and Wren let go of each other.

"Keep your head down once we're outside," Sparrow tells her as we head toward the front door. "None of us were followed, but you can't be too careful."

With her hand on the doorknob, Aubrey turns toward us one last time. There are tears in her eyes as she whispers, "Thank you," and then she opens the door and steps outside.

"Owen was able to get out alive thanks to the heads up you gave us," Sparrow says as she moves to follow Aubrey. "I may not have a man on the inside anymore, but I'm only a call away if you need anything. It's time you

three finished this.” She catches herself with a smile and glances at Wren. “Well, four now, I suppose.”

“We’ll be in touch,” Elliot says, and then he closes the door behind her.

A tired silence fills the room. Wren sniffles quietly before wiping at her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket.

“You okay, love?”

“I didn’t want to say goodbye so quickly.”

Elliot’s eyes soften with sympathy, but before he can say anything, all our phones go off.

Finn: Made it out fine. I’ll let you know how much repairs cost when I get the bill.

Finn: Also, Axel is an ass.

“Glad he’s okay,” I say, half to myself.

I felt bad leaving Finn to fend for himself, but we couldn’t pull this off any other way. If he’s followed for any reason, he can’t be seen with us. Otherwise, Holloway’s men could figure out that we worked together to get Aubrey out.

Elliot slides his phone into his back pocket before wrapping his arms around Wren. “We did it.”

“That’s right. We’re one step closer.” I grab Rhett’s hand and press my lips to his knuckles. “And now it’s time to figure out how to save your brothers.”

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Chapter Nineteen

Wren

In the morning, Elliot is already out of bed by the time I wake up. All of us wanted to return to the safety of home as soon as possible yesterday, so we decided not to stay at the safe house overnight. I barely remember pulling Elliot into my bedroom and crawling under the covers with him.

Even though I'm still exhausted, I force myself to get up. I've never been one to stay in bed for long after I'm awake. I get too restless.

Once I've peed, brushed my teeth, and washed my face, I consider finding Elliot. But if he got up early, he probably wants some alone time or something like that.

The guys packed up all my books from my apartment and brought them over, but I haven't had the energy to arrange them on my shelves yet. I'm not sure I have the energy now, but I need something to distract myself with.

I was hoping that a good night's sleep would calm my nerves, but I'm just as much of a wreck as I was yesterday. I'm not nervous about the

wedding anymore, but we still have to find a way to rescue Andrew and Benny.

After that . . . I'm not entirely sure what. Elliot said the contents of the hard drive are exactly what we need, but I'm not sure what we're going to do with all of it.

Just as I finish setting up a shelf of fantasy books, I frown. *I love this series, but am I really going to reread it anytime soon? So maybe I should put it lower down. Or higher? Or—*

A *clunk* behind me makes me jump. When I turn, Elliot is setting down a tray on my dresser. Two steaming cups of coffee sit on it along with a bowl of fruit. Warmth washes over me at the sight.

"Wasn't sure if you'd be up yet," he says as he carefully picks up one of the mugs. "Didn't mean to scare you, either. You okay?"

I almost give him a default, "Oh, I'm fine," answer, but I stop myself. Elliot didn't ask the question as a formality. He truly wants to know.

With a sigh, I lean against my shelf. "I guess I have a lot on my mind."

Worry flickers in Elliot's eyes as he steps up to me. His fingers brush over my cheek, and I lean into his hand. However simple and small it is, his touch sends a wave of calm through me.

"Talk to me," he says softly.

But I shake my head and slip my arms around his neck. Gently, I tug him down until his lips brush against mine. With a groan, Elliot kisses me lightly and grabs onto my waist. His hips press into mine, pinning me in between his body and the bookshelf.

This. This is what I need, not talking through my worries.

I just need to . . . let go.

It may not be a permanent solution, but that's not what I'm looking for. Besides, we have Ludo completely fooled. We deserve to celebrate and relax a little.

"Love." Elliot barely moves back, and I can practically *feel* the desire rolling off him. But a question shines in his eyes. He needs to know that I'm at least somewhat okay.

"We can talk later," I tell him. "But right now, I don't want to *think*, let alone talk. I just want my damn brain to shut off."

He nods slowly, searching my face. Only once he's satisfied with what he's found does he lean in again. He doesn't kiss me—just inhales deeply and presses his lips to my jawbone. "Tell me what you want me to do."

His low voice combined with the thought of him doing whatever I ask makes me shiver in anticipation. "Tie me up?"

"That could be . . ." Elliot hums before squeezing my waist.

"If you want to." That wasn't the reaction I was hoping I'd get from him, but it's the one I should've expected. We're all exhausted. Of course he doesn't have the energy for that. It was unfair of me to even ask. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't—"

"Sorry?" He pulls back slightly so he can look me in the eye. "Wren, it'd be my pleasure."

"You . . . you're sure?"

"Completely. I understand. Sometimes you need help to get to a place where you can fully relax."

"But what about you?"

"It has a similar effect on me," he says. "Do you only want me to tie you up? Or do you want more?"

"More, please. As long as you do."

“Oh, definitely.” His lips curve upward. “Besides, it’s about time I got my payback.”

Oh, shit. A wave of giddy desire washes over me, and I grin. “I was wondering if you forgot.”

His chuckle is low and dark. “Never.”

I press my lips to his. Elliot doesn’t let the kiss last long, though. When I try to lean in for more, he stops me.

“Remember, love. You don’t get what you want until I say so.” He pulls me away from the shelf. “And I plan on making you wait a long, long time.”

I groan as Elliot leaves to grab some ropes from his room. I’m not entirely sure what I’ve gotten into. Oliver said he’ll tease me for hours without letting me come, but that has to be an exaggeration, right? I suppose I’m about to find out.

By the time Elliot comes back, I’m practically vibrating with nervous energy. He smiles and nods to the bed. When I sit on the end of it, I watch his reflection in the mirror as he approaches. It’s then that I realize that the mirror was probably placed in that spot *very* much on purpose.

“I’ve never had sex in front of a mirror before,” I blurt as Elliot tugs my T-shirt over my head.

“No? It’s fun. I think you’ll like it. Up.”

I stand, and he pushes my leggings and underwear down. Once I’ve stepped out of them, he frowns with his gaze fixed on my leg.

“What happened?”

I glance down, following his eyes to the bandage on my thigh. “Oh. Rhett did that. I asked him to.”

At that, Elliot smiles. I reach for the hem of his shirt, but he pushes my hands away.

“What did I tell you, love?”

I huff. “I don’t get what I want until you say so.”

“That’s right. And I suggest you be a good girl and listen, or this is going to be a lot harder on you than necessary.”

A whimper escapes my lips unbidden as Elliot pulls my bralette off and tosses it onto the floor. I know this will be worth it—Elliot always makes sure I’m more than satisfied—but it’ll be torture first.

“Will Oliver and Rhett be disappointed that they’re missing out?” I ask. We didn’t get a chance to celebrate last night, and I don’t want them to feel left out.

“Nah. I don’t think either of them slept that well. I checked, and they’re both still passed out in Rhett’s bed.” Elliot grabs one of the bundles of rope. “Which means you’re completely mine for the next couple of hours.”

Elliot pushes me onto the bed before crawling on with me and positioning one of my ankles. “Keep it like that for the moment.”

I stay still, watching as he loops the rope around my ankle. His movements are filled with a confidence that I find *very* attractive, and the way he ties me with such care sets me at ease.

As Elliot continues, my breathing deepens, and tension I didn’t realize I was holding in my muscles flows out of me. By the time I’m on my back and tied spread-eagle to the bed, my mind is blissfully empty.

“How do you feel?” Elliot double-checks the tightness of the ropes before running a finger down the center of my body.

My response is a satisfied, happy hum. I do my best to stretch toward him, hoping he’ll give me a kiss, but he doesn’t.

“If you start to get uncomfortable, just tell me.”

“I will,” I reply as I eye his lips. I know better than to ask for a kiss, but god do I want one.

Elliot moves off the bed. “You’re gonna hate me for this next part.”

“You mean I’m gonna hate myself.” I wiggle and tug my wrists to test the ropes. “I could’ve backed out. I chose not to.”

A smile tugs at his mouth, and he lowers himself into the reading chair by my bookshelves. When he settles in and gets comfortable, my heart skips a beat.

“What are you doing?”

His gaze roams over my body, leaving me squirming with want. “Enjoying seeing you tied up like this.”

My jaw drops. This whole time, I was thinking he’d at least be touching me in some capacity. Teasing me, edging me, using me. But he’s not even going to do that.

This isn’t fair. I almost say the words out loud before I catch myself. This is exactly what I signed up for.

At first, I try to accept my fate. It’s not like he’ll keep me here forever, right? Elliot’s patience will run out eventually. But the longer he stares at me, the harder it is for me to find *my* patience. I’m completely on display for him, and he hasn’t taken off an inch of clothing.

I’m not sure how long it’s been when I finally pull against the ropes binding my wrists. A pitiful whimper escapes my mouth, and Elliot smirks.

How long is he going to just sit there?

“Regretting your decision, love?”

I smirk back. “Worth it.”

He crosses one leg over the other as his smile widens. “We’ll see if you’re still saying that in an hour.”

I bite back my groan. Elliot doesn’t budge. I’m literally aching for his touch, but he just continues moving his eyes across my body. I can practically feel his gaze, especially when it lingers between my legs.

“I think I should do this more often,” he says softly. “You look so pretty tied up for me.”

Goddammit. How long is he going to hold out?

I glance around for a clock to see how long I’ve been tied up, but all I find are things that make this whole situation more tortuous. Memories flood my mind when my eyes land on the painting above my dresser. The things Elliot said to me that evening will forever be burned into my brain.

Next, I lift my head and catch my reflection in the mirror. I can’t see much except for my spread legs and how soaked I am. With a soft moan, I avert my eyes to keep looking for a clock, but I come up empty.

I’m going to die of pure need if he doesn’t get up soon.

In the end, I’m not sure how long Elliot stays in that chair for. Watching, waiting, teasing me with his gaze. Eventually, I can’t hold back a groan any longer. I signed myself up for Elliot paying me back like this, but I need his hands on me. Or his lips, or his mouth, or his cock buried deep inside me.

“Ell.”

He chuckles. “Begging already? I thought you’d last longer than this.”

With a huff, I press my lips together. *Damn him.*

Standing, he circles the bed until he’s standing at the base of it. The hunger in his eyes hasn’t died down. In fact, it’s only grown. Still, he keeps his hands buried in his pockets. As his gaze moves down my body, he clicks

his tongue. “You’re soaked, and I haven’t even touched you yet. Such a desperate slut, aren’t you?”

I give him my best glare. “You’re enjoying this far too much.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Yeah? And what’re you gonna do about it?”

“Ohhh, fuck you!”

He laughs. “You wish.”

I. am. going. to. DIE.

“Just one touch,” I beg. “Or one kiss?”

Elliot takes a single finger and traces it from my throat to my belly button. All it does is make me need him more. The ache between my legs intensifies, but there isn’t a thing I can do to relieve it.

“You already did this to me on your birthday,” I whine. “Can’t that count toward my punishment?”

“I told you then that it wouldn’t, love.” Crawling onto the bed, he strokes a hand over my hair before leaning down. He doesn’t kiss me, though—he stays right outside of my reach. “And I know you can handle it.”

“But Elliot—”

“You’ll get what you need, I promise.” He pulls back and places a hand on my stomach. It’s a light touch, one of reassurance. “*Eventually.*”

I hold back my groan as Elliot’s hand travels down my body. When his fingers hit my inner thigh, I can’t help it—I try to shift to get some kind of friction against his hand.

“Ah ah, Wren. I don’t think so.” He continues to use a feather-light touch as his fingers brush against my skin.

“Please,” I whisper.

“Beg all you want, love, but you’re not coming.”

For what feels like an eternity and a half, Elliot runs his hands all over my body. He avoids any spot that'd give me relief, choosing instead to massage my calves, squeeze my breasts, and pepper my skin with kisses.

Eventually, I relax into it. From the moment Elliot sat in that chair, he hasn't looked away from me—not even for a second. This may be payback, but it also feels like a form of worship. His touch is gentle and caring, and he's so attentive to every movement and sound I make.

When his finger finally brushes against one of my hard nipples, I gasp. His chuckle sends warmth spiraling through me.

"Beautiful." The word falls from Elliot's lips as a whisper. His breath skates across my skin as he leans over me and takes one of my nipples into his mouth.

Just like that, tension floods my body again. I pull on the restraints, arching my back into him. He sucks gently and flicks his tongue while he pinches my other nipple in between his fingers.

The ache inside of me intensifies. I was hoping this would provide some relief, but it only makes me need Elliot more.

"Please," I whisper hoarsely.

Elliot's hand leaves my breast and slowly trails down my body. Of course, he keeps his pace slothfully slow, and it only serves to draw even more tension into my muscles.

When his finger finally brushes over my clit, I choke on air. But his touch disappears a moment later, and he moves away from me.

Is he trying *to kill me?*

"Lift your head," he says, his voice dripping with lust. At least he's having trouble holding himself back. "Look at how wet you are."

I do as he says, and heat rushes through me. From this angle, I can just make out a wet spot on my new blanket.

“Such a messy girl.” He shakes his head as his mouth tips up in a devious smile. “What am I going to do with you?”

I resist the urge—no, the *need*—to beg for his touch. Still, my expression is pleading as he watches me.

Finally, he moves in between my spread legs and settles on his knees. He doesn’t touch me—just looks—and a deep satisfaction blooms in his eyes.

It became apparent our very first night together that Elliot loves this. The surrender of power and control. The ability to drive someone out of their mind with need. He’s always loved holding my orgasms hostage, and secretly, I’ve always loved it, too.

Even now, however desperate I am to come, I wouldn’t want anything else with him. He may put my body through a roller coaster of highs and lows, of want and deprivation, but I trust him. He didn’t have to tell me that he’ll give me what I need—I already know.

So when his finger finally slides over my clit, I let out a sigh of relief and close my eyes. His movements stay slow and lazy, but I’m so sensitive and worked up that it doesn’t make much difference. Within minutes, I’m teetering on the edge of an orgasm. My breaths are heavier, and heat rushes through my body. I whimper, arching my back as I’m about to come, and—

Elliot pulls his hand away.

“No,” I cry.

“Shh,” he whispers soothingly. “Patience, love.”

Four more times, he brings me right to the edge but doesn’t let me come. I’m a gasping, sweaty mess—a direct opposite of Elliot right now.

Still dressed.

Still infuriatingly calm.

Still working my clit lazily.

Slowly, Elliot slips a finger into me. He curls it, hooking it inside of me, before he twists. His finger drags across my g-spot in a way that yanks an unexpected cry from my throat.

“Fuck,” he whispers.

“Again,” I moan. “Please, Elliot.”

I figure he won’t, which makes me cry out again when he does. He slides another finger into me while using his thumb to massage tight circles over my clit.

“Look at you,” he says lowly. “Squirming on my hand and soaking my fingers like a greedy slut. You want to come?”

“Yes,” I gasp.

Mischief sparks in his eyes, and I’m sure he’s going to pull away at the last second again. Just as I brace myself for a letdown, he curls his fingers into me harder. Electricity shoots through my veins, and within seconds, I’m coming.

My orgasm knocks the breath out of my lungs and leaves me trembling. Liquid gushes onto Elliot’s fingers, probably soaking my blanket, but he doesn’t stop. Only when the sensations become too much and I try to twist away from his touch does he remove his hand.

“I love when you squirt for me,” Elliot says, not taking his eyes off his glistening fingers. “Such a good girl.”

My only response is a helpless whimper. It takes me a minute to clear the haziness in my mind, and by the time I do, Elliot is partway done with untying me.

Once he’s done with my arms, I push myself up onto my elbows. I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror—wild-eyed, still panting, and an absolute mess.

I watch as Elliot sets the ropes to the side and climbs onto the bed. He doesn’t tell me what position to get into. He just takes me into his arms and flips me over so I’m on my hands and knees facing the foot of the bed.

And facing the mirror.

He moves me over a little to avoid the wet spot I left before smacking my ass, barely hard enough to hurt. I drop to my elbows and moan into the blankets as he massages the spot he hit.

“I need more,” I groan. That orgasm was strong enough to throw any patience I had left out the window. I want Elliot to do that to me again and again.

“But you’re doing so well for me,” he croons. A finger brushes over my entrance before barely pushing inside.

“More, Ell.”

With a click of his tongue, he removes his finger and strokes my ass. “Don’t you want to be my good girl, Wren?”

I scream into the mattress.

“I know you do.” Leaning forward, he kisses the small of my back. He works his way up my spine until his body is covering mine. In my ear, he whispers, “I know you can take it.”

I whimper as he straightens and goes back to torturing me. He plays with my clit lightly while watching my expressions in the mirror.

“At least take your clothes off?” I ask. “Please? I want to see you.”

He pulls his T-shirt over his head before working his pants and boxer briefs off his legs. “Better?”

“Much,” I say with a content sigh. I watch his reflection in the mirror, taking in every inch of bare skin I can see. His butterfly tattoo is visible on his ribcage, and I have to stop myself from turning around and running my fingers over it.

“Ell?”

“Hmm?”

“Please fuck me.”

He smiles and runs his hand over the curve of my ass. Based on how he’s been looking at me, I’m pretty sure he’s running out of self-control. At least, that’s my hope.

Elliot lines his cock up and just barely slides into me. “Touch your clit, and don’t stop until I tell you to.”

I lower myself so my cheek is resting on the blanket, and then I snake one hand underneath me. As I begin rubbing my clit, he slides in an inch, and then another.

“Elliot, *ohmygod.”*

“I know,” he murmurs. He keeps one hand braced on my hip, and with the other, he strokes the backs of his fingers over my ass.

“Please don’t stop,” I whisper. When he finally slides out and then all the way back in, I gasp.

“Just relax.” His voice is low and soothing as he fucks me with slow, even thrusts. “I’ve got you.”

“I—I *can’t.* Elliot, it feels too good.”

He keeps moving inside of me, and I feel myself clamping down on his cock. It makes him swear under his breath, and he finally picks up his pace. “Shit, Wren.”

I move my hips to meet his thrusts. Every movement, every touch, pulls me deeper into a state of palpable need. My moans fill the air as I move my fingers faster.

So close. God, so close.

“Stop,” Elliot says.

It almost kills me, but I let my hand fall onto the mattress.

Elliot pulls me up until my shoulders hit his chest. He locks an arm around my waist to keep me against him, and then his free hand dips in between my legs. When he finds my clit, I can’t help but clench around his cock.

I angle my face toward him. The position is a little awkward, but his lips meet mine anyway. He groans against my mouth as he lightly pinches my clit between his fingers.

A shudder rolls through me, and I grab onto his arm. He’s going to make me come if he keeps this up.

“Watch yourself,” Elliot commands, nudging my head so I’m looking at myself in the mirror. “Watch how well you take my cock.”

I do, staring at the spot where he’s sliding in and out of me. All I can do is let out a choked whimper as he drives into me harder. The image I find in the mirror serves to heighten the sensations he’s pulling from me.

Not only am I a complete wreck, but I’m only held up by his arm around me. My arousal coats my inner thighs as well as Elliot’s dick, reminding me just how wet he’s made me.

“That’s it,” Elliot grunts. “Taking it like the good girl you are.”

He rubs my clit harder, faster, until I can’t hold back any longer. I meet his gaze questioningly in the mirror, desperately hoping for permission.

I barely last two seconds after he nods.

I know better than to try and quiet my cries. So as Elliot slams into me, I don’t hold back. He whispers little praises in my ear as I ride wave after wave of my orgasm.

“Ell, that was—”

We hear a thud from the other side of the hall—Rhett’s room—and then a loud groan.

Oh god. Are they—

“You hear that, love? You hear what you’re doing to them?” Elliot leaves a trail of hot kisses down my neck. “You and your screams.”

Oliver and Rhett don’t bother keeping it down. I didn’t think it was possible, but somehow, it turns me on even more than I already am.

With a groan, Elliot lowers me onto the bed so I’m on my stomach. He grabs a pillow and slides it under my hips before kissing my shoulder.

The mattress dips as Elliot gets into position. His cock hits the perfect spot inside me, and I cry out as he starts fucking me again. His thrusts are more forceful than before, and I wouldn’t want it any other way.

Based on the breathless moans coming from Elliot, he’s close. I do my best to meet his thrusts, raising my head so I can watch him in the mirror. He locks eyes with me just as he comes.

Satisfaction blooms deep inside of me. There’s nothing like watching another person fall apart and knowing you had something to do with it. The vulnerability, the intimacy, the pleasure—and in this moment, it’s all mine.

Elliot all but collapses, and he barely catches himself before he crushes me under his weight. Groaning, he rolls off me. Just as disappointment creeps in at the cool air replacing his body against mine, he tugs me closer. I sigh happily and turn to face him. His eyes are closed, and his forehead is covered in a light sheen of sweat.

I press my lips to his in a sweet kiss, and a happy noise sounds in the back of his throat.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“Mmm.” He nuzzles his face in my neck, and I feel the words against my skin as he murmurs, “I love you, too.”

. . .

The scent of lavender fills my bathroom as water pours into the tub. Elliot just finished adding in a few drops of essential oil, and I watch as he sets the little bottle on the counter.

I’ve come a long way in regard to my newfound fear of water, but I’m not entirely over it yet. Just looking at the tub makes it harder to breathe, but I know I’m safe. I just have to work through it little by little.

“You’re sure you’re okay with this?” Elliot’s touch is gentle and reassuring as he turns me to face him.

“I want to. Just, um . . . can you get in first?”

“Of course, love.” Elliot steps into the water. Once he’s sitting down, he holds out his hand. “Just focus on me.”

As I climb in, I keep my attention on Elliot’s firm hold and on how nice the hot water feels against my skin. I take my time turning and lowering myself until I’m sitting in between Elliot’s legs, too afraid of slipping and falling if I go quickly.

His arms encircle my waist, and he pulls me until my back hits his chest. “Feeling okay?”

“I think so.” My fingers skim across the surface of the water. Panic threatens to take over my mind, but I keep my breaths even and close my

eyes. Leaning my head back on Elliot's shoulder, I whisper, "I'm safe with you."

His lips are soft against my jawbone as he murmurs, "Always."

Eventually, I work up the courage to open my eyes. The water is still and glassy, and I watch the ripples as I lower myself until the water hits my collarbones.

See? Perfectly fine.

"Love?"

"Hmm?"

Elliot pulls me up. "I was worried you fell asleep."

"I am pretty tired," I admit. "But I don't think I can relax that much."

"Just stay up here with me," he says as his thumb rubs against my stomach. "Please."

"Sorry." I give his arm a reassuring squeeze.

Elliot's right. However much I want to be as far past my fear of water as possible, now isn't the time to push myself. I should be focused on him right now.

"Are you doing okay?" I ask him.

"A lot better now that we have the hard drive. I don't think I've ever been that nervous before a job. Not since we were kids, anyway." Elliot blows out a long breath. "I'm still a little worried about Ludo roping us into finding Aubrey, but there's not much to stress about. We just have to play the part until she contacts him."

"And that won't last long."

"Exactly." He pauses for a moment before saying, "I'm mostly concerned for Rhett now. He went straight from finding out Richard has a secret

family to scrambling to protect his new brothers. He hasn't had time to process, and he's already so angry."

"It's almost like Richard abandoned him again," I say softly.

"Yeah. And I don't even know how to help. My parents may suck, but they stuck around, and I know they love me. If anything, *I've* abandoned *them.* Not that they don't deserve it. But when it comes to Rhett, I can't even begin to imagine how he feels. Oliver may be able to understand, but I . . . I'm lost."

"What happened to Oliver's dad?"

"None of us know for sure. He just disappeared one day. Meredith was still pregnant with Maria at the time. She filed a missing person's report, but the police never found him. Oliver barely remembers him, let alone what happened, and Meredith doesn't like talking about it. Oliver has always chosen to believe that something happened to his dad. I think it was better than wondering why he wasn't good enough for his dad to stick around, you know?"

"I do," I say. "My dad didn't want me."

"Oh." He presses his face into my neck. "Love, I'm sorry. That's awful."

I shrug. "I'm over it for the most part. It's not like it was personal. When my mom told my dad she was pregnant with me, he wanted out. Not everyone wants to be a parent. Not everyone has to be. But I still wonder if he thinks about us. If he started his own family when he was ready, and if he's happy. If he regrets not staying with us. Or if he's never thought of me since he and my mom parted ways."

"You deserved better," Elliot tells me.

"I used to dream up fantasies of him showing up at our door and taking me away from Patricia and Thomas. But now, I suppose I'm grateful he

didn’t.”

“Why?”

I twist so I can look at him. “Because my life led me to you. And I wouldn’t want to do anything to jeopardize that.”

Elliot’s eyes soften, and he presses his lips to mine tenderly. Just as the kiss begins to deepen, a knock on the door startles us both.

Oliver steps in and gives us an apologetic grimace. “Ell, your phone’s been ringing off the hook. It’s Ludo.”

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Chapter Twenty

Elliot

I’m vaguely aware of my body going stiff. We knew Ludo would call to ask for our help, but I was hoping it wouldn’t come until later. It was a foolish thought on my part.

I hold my hand out, mouthing *thank you* to Oliver before pressing my phone to my ear. “Hello?”

Ludo doesn’t even bother with a greeting. “Aubrey has been kidnapped.” His voice is tight. Scared, almost.

“Kidnapped?” I don’t even have to fake the surprise in my voice. We predicted Ludo would reach out, but him thinking Aubrey was kidnapped? We definitely didn’t think that’s the conclusion he’d jump to.

“Yes. We woke up this morning, and she was missing. At first I thought she ran, but there’s no way she could’ve left unnoticed. Her kidnappers knew exactly what they were doing.”

“How can we help?” I ask as my gaze lands on Rhett. He came in after Oliver, and his face is shadowed with worry.

“I need her back,” Ludo says. “They had the audacity to kidnap my wife from my home on our *wedding night.* I can’t let that slide.”

I clench my jaw. Of course he isn’t concerned about Aubrey’s safety. He cares more about the principle of it—he’s Ludo Holloway. How *dare* someone abduct his wife from right under his nose.

“No one’s contacted me about a ransom yet, but I know who did it,” Ludo continues. “It’s the same man who tried to have her kidnapped when we were in Florida—Peter Huxley. He’s a rival of mine. I was considering keeping him around because he’s amusing to piss off, but after this, he’s a dead man.”

“You want us to kill him?” I ask.

“No. Bring him to me alive. Along with Aubrey, of course. My guess is he’s keeping her close. And do it quickly, Hayes. I want her back to me by tonight. I’ll pay whatever price you deem necessary.”

“Will do.”

There’s silence on the other end, and for a second, I think Ludo has already hung up. But then he speaks, and the way his voice is tinged with panic catches me off guard. “I’m asking you three because at this point, I don’t know who else to trust. This had to have been an inside job, and I need this handled by people who aren’t going to betray me.”

Satisfaction slides over my skin. Not only is Ludo admitting to weakness, but he’s also placing his trust in the worst people possible. He truly has no clue—and why would he? We’ve done an excellent job keeping our true feelings to ourselves.

“We’ll find her,” I say. “You don’t have to worry.”

The call ends, and I press my face into Wren’s neck with a burdened sigh. All I wanted was to have a nice morning with her before we joined the guys

for breakfast.

“What did he say?” Rhett asks. “Are we in the clear?”

“Completely. He thinks Aubrey was kidnapped, and he wants us to find her kidnapper and bring both of them back alive by tonight.”

Rhett swears under his breath. “He wasn’t supposed to give us such a short window of time. That’s not even twenty-four hours.”

“What’re we gonna do?” Oliver asks. “We can grab Huxley, but it’s not like he actually has Aubrey. We’ll still be showing up half-empty handed.”

“It’s the best option we’ve got,” I reply. “We can tell Ludo we couldn’t find Aubrey anywhere, which will be the truth. From there, he’ll probably send us on a wild goose chase, and we’ll just have to put up our best show. Aubrey is planning on contacting him tonight, so we don’t have to put up a ruse for long.”

“And if it’s not enough?”

“We’ll come up with something,” Rhett says. “We’ll make a show of trying to get Aubrey’s location out of Huxley or searching everywhere we can think of. She may be long gone, but we have Ludo’s trust, and we’re not losing it. We have to look like we’re giving our all to find her.”

“Love,” I say gently. “I’m sorry, but I have to get out.”

Once we’re out of the tub, Oliver hands us towels. I keep my mind fixed on how exactly we’re going to find Peter Huxley as I dry off.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Wren asks.

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think so.” Once I’ve knotted my towel around my hips, I give her a quick kiss on her cheek. “I’ll let you know if that changes.”

She nods, watching me with concern.

I don’t even bother throwing clothes on. “We’ll need to look up Huxley’s main residence. It’s a Sunday, so he’s probably at home. And can someone call Sparrow and see if she knows anything about his security? Or literally anything? I’m sure she wants an update on Ludo’s reaction anyway.”

“Got it,” Rhett says. “I’ll be in the library.”

With one last longing glance toward Rhett, Oliver, and Wren, I head toward my office. We’ll only be able to hold Ludo off for so long before he realizes that either we know more than we’re letting on, or we’re incapable of finding Aubrey. The latter is obviously the best choice, but we need to make it look like we have a thorough search planned.

My phone vibrates in my hand, and I check it as I go.

Ludo: A hard drive was also taken from me. If you can find it, I’ll double your payment.

I smirk. *Yeah, you’re never getting that drive back, buddy.*

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Chapter Twenty-One

Rhett

Thankfully, Sparrow has some information on Peter Huxley that proves to be helpful. He has a few legitimate businesses, but it seems like the bulk of his money is in underground gambling. My guess is that's why Huxley sent two of his men to kidnap Aubrey in Florida. Ludo recently entered into the gambling scene, and Huxley was probably trying to blackmail him out of it.

As for his security, his house has a state-of-the-art system and a handful of guards there at all times. He's rarely alone, but there's one opening that looks like the perfect opportunity.

On Mondays, Huxley has a morning at home before eating lunch with his wife. At one o'clock, a car comes to pick him up and take him to his office.

There will already be two people in the car—his driver and his head of security, who'll give him an update on the events of the previous night. So all we have to do is take them out, get the car to his house on time, and subdue him. It's around eleven right now, which gives us plenty of time.

After I text with Elliot to iron out the details, Wren walks into the library. She's dressed in leggings and a sweater, but her cozy outfit does little to

disguise how nervous she looks.

“You okay?” I ask from where I’m seated with my laptop in front of me.

She’s playing with a loose thread in her sweater as she comes to stand in front of my desk. “I know you’re busy, but I need to talk to you.”

Shutting my laptop, I stand. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Everything’s perfect. I mean, as perfect as everything can be. But you . . . I . . .” She drops the loose thread and twists her fingers together. “I just need to say something. To you, specifically.”

My pulse picks up, but I keep my expression calm. “Go on.”

Inching closer, she reaches out to take my hand, but then she stops. After staying frozen for a moment, she lets her arm drop back down to her side. “Did you know that when you guys first started coming to the coffee shop, I thought you hated me?”

I frown. “What?”

“You were always so tense. I took your order every time, and you’d barely look me in the eye, so I assumed I’d done something to offend you.”

“No. God, no, I never hated you. You were just . . .” *So beautiful. Unattainable. Safe when we were anything but.* “Maybe I was intimidated.”

At that, she laughs. “You were intimidated by *me?*”

My only response is a nod, and her smile drops when she realizes I’m not joking. Her hand twitches at her side, like she’s stopping herself from touching me.

Not a good sign.

“What do you need to tell me?”

“I learned eventually that you didn’t hate me. Obviously.” She laughs nervously. “I’ve learned so much about you. I’ve watched you open up to

me even though it tore you up inside. I've seen how deeply you care for Ell and Oliver. For . . . for me."

And that's when it clicks in my mind where she's going with this. The one place I was hoping we could avoid a little longer.

"I can't imagine my life without the three of you," she says. "Without *you*, Rhett."

Dread courses through my veins. I'm not ready for this. Not even close. Doesn't matter how hard I tried to be.

What if she doesn't understand?

"Sweetheart, I already know."

"Please," Wren whispers. "If something happens today—if one of you gets hurt, or caught, or . . ." She doesn't finish that last part, which is probably for the best. "I need to say it. I need you to hear it."

But I don't think I can say it back.

My throat is closing in on itself, and my skin is on fire, but I don't show it. The last time we went on a job without her, she almost died. I won't take this from her if she needs it.

Wren doesn't touch me. Doesn't step any closer than she already is. But she holds my gaze as she takes a deep breath.

I hold my own in anticipation.

"I love you," she says. "I have for a while now. Maybe before I should've, but I don't care. I've been given the chance to be loved by one of the most caring, strong, and fiercely loyal men I've ever met. You make me feel seen, Rhett. And *I see you.* I see your struggles. I see your heart. And every time you reveal a new part of yourself, I fall more deeply in love with you. I don't think I'll ever stop, and I don't want to."

“Wren.” Her name sounds wrong on my lips. My voice is broken. Distressed. A far cry from the joy and reciprocation she deserves.

“I don’t want you to say it back.”

A weight is lifted from my chest at the same time a new one crashes down on me. I have to grip the back of my chair to keep from losing my balance. “But—”

“Don’t. Not until you can say it without it making you uncomfortable. Without it making you think of him.”

“And if I never reach that point?” I rasp.

She smiles, even if it’s small. “I know anyway.”

“You deserve better than that,” I grit out.

“And you deserve to be loved the way you need to be loved. You deserve patience and understanding. You deserve to be told that you’re loved simply because it’s true. Not because I’m expecting you to say it back.”

“Wren—”

“It’s okay,” she whispers.

No. *No.* This can’t happen like this. It can’t. It can’t, it can’t, it can’t. But I can’t bring myself to say the words.

Partly because of *him,* but also because she doesn’t want me to. Not like this.

My vision blurs. It’s like I’m stuck. Suspended between who I am and who I want to be. Between the darkness of my past and the love and safety of my present. My future.

Don’t let him win.

Fight for her—even if your best is what you wish was your worst.

There’s no possible way I can say the words. Wren deserves better than them being forced, anyway. But I have to do something. *Anything.*

Anything other than standing here while she stares at me with such care, such understanding, even though I'm probably breaking her heart.

When I step toward Wren, she steps back. I try it again and get the same reaction. Again and again and again until she's pressed up against one of the bookshelves.

She shakes her head. "You don't have to touch me."

"I *need* to touch you."

Wren frowns.

That's not how this should go.

She should be smiling. She should be laughing and kissing you and hearing you say it back.

"You need to?" She's tilting her head, watching me with worry.

I grip the shelf on either side of her. The need to feel her against me is almost overpowering, but I can't act on it. Not until I know she's okay with it. "It's the only way I can . . ." My head dips down until my lips are so close to her skin that I can almost taste her. "Wren, I don't know how else . . ."

She lets out the smallest breath before her hands curl into the fabric at my hips. When she tugs me closer, it's all I can do to stop myself from falling into her. I wrap her up in my arms, crushing her to my chest even though I know my hold is probably too tight.

I don't realize I'm crying until I feel Wren silently sobbing against me. My voice fails me when I try to console her, and that's when I notice that my own cheeks are wet with tears.

"Rhett, I'm so sorry," she whispers as she looks up at me with glassy eyes.

“Why are *you* sorry?” My voice is incredulous, the words uneven. I grab her face and thumb away her tears. “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

“Because you deserved so much better.” Her hands cover mine. “And he never deserved to have you. Not even for a split second. What he did to you . . .” She tries to continue, but her face scrunches up, and the only sound that leaves her is a heavy sob.

Hearing Wren cry for my younger self feels like my heart is ripping in two. And then that cold feeling of guilt seeps into my skin and eats at my insides.

I should be past all this by now.

She deserves so much better. They all do.

As she sniffles, Wren wipes at my tears. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I say gently.

“Hey, um . . .”

We both look up to find Elliot standing near the doorway. He’s fully dressed and ready to go. When he gets a better look at us, his brows knit together in a concerned frown.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just—” Wren lets out a tearful laugh as she wipes at her cheeks. “I just have really bad timing. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” I murmur. My heart may be aching, but if she needed to say it, then I’m happy she did. “We can finish this when we get home.”

Wren nods. “I’d like that.”

Leaving her is physically painful, but the sooner we leave, the sooner we get back home. So we keep our goodbye short, and I do my best to clear my mind as we head out.

Wren waves at us from the garage, and I lift my hand in return.

I love you too, sweetheart, I think to myself. *And I'm sorry I can't be what you need.*

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Chapter Twenty-Two

Oliver

The first part of our plan goes smoothly. All it took was slipping a little sedative into their coffees, and Huxley's head of security and driver passed out in minutes. Now we're in their car, nearing Huxley's home, and I'm practically vibrating with nervous energy.

Leaving Wren behind felt like parting with a piece of my soul, but it's not like we can take her with us. Still, I didn't think we'd have to spend today apart. I just want to finish this and get back home.

"Ready?" Rhett asks lowly as he steers the vehicle into Huxley's driveway. It circles around a large fountain in the front yard.

"Ready," Elliot confirms from the backseat.

Even though the windows are darkened, I shrink down in my seat. I don't want to spook Huxley if he sees me when he opens the door.

"There he is," I whisper.

Peter's wife has followed him to the front door. They share a sweet kiss before he moves toward the car with happy, confident strides.

If he was actually innocent, maybe I'd feel guilty about capturing him and bringing him to Ludo. But his hands aren't entirely clean. He had nothing to do with Aubrey's disappearance, but he did order to have her kidnapped in Florida.

Huxley pulls out his phone about halfway to the car. *Perfect.* The more distracted he is when he enters, the better.

I hold my breath as he opens the door. He slides into the backseat without even looking up, and it's not until he's closed into the car that he realizes his mistake.

"What—"

"Don't move," Elliot says smoothly. He keeps his gun low, but it's pointed in Huxley's direction. "Do exactly what we say, or you won't make it out of this car alive."

Huxley gulps, his gaze never leaving Elliot's weapon. "Who do you work for?"

"Who do you think?" Rhett says as he pulls the car around the driveway. "Get him cuffed."

"I—I'll cooperate," Huxley says. "Please, there's no need. I just want to make it back home to my wife."

It's a little difficult, but I turn around in my seat and cuff his hands. It's either me or Elliot, and he's got a more important job right now.

"Where are you keeping Aubrey?" Rhett asks. Odds are, Ludo is going to interrogate him, so we need to keep up appearances.

"What?" Huxley sputters. "Why would I know that?"

"We know it was you who tried to have her kidnapped when she was in Florida," I say, "so just give it up. Where are you hiding her, and where's the hard drive?"

“I have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“You really want to lie to us?” Elliot taunts.

We slow to a stop at a red light. Panic flashes in Huxley’s eyes, and before he’s even reaching for the door handle, Elliot grabs the collar of his shirt.

“Don’t even think about it. Give us her location and the location of the hard drive, and maybe then Ludo will let you go.”

“Please,” Huxley cries. “I didn’t kidnap her! I’ll admit, I tried to, but I failed. My men couldn’t get past Holloway’s security. Whoever has her now, it’s not me.”

“Fine,” Rhett grits out. “Keep lying. It’ll only make Ludo angrier, but that’s a you problem.”

“I didn’t kidnap her. Please, I’m telling the truth!”

Peter spends the rest of the drive trying to convince us of what we already know. He offers us money, reminds us of his wife, and even promises to help us find Aubrey. By the time we’re pulling into Ludo’s driveway, I’m ready to gag him to shut him up.

Rhett and I get Peter out of the car, and Elliot keeps his gun out just in case. It’d be foolish to try to run now, but Huxley is getting more desperate.

“I’m innocent,” he pleads.

“Shut up,” Rhett snaps.

Axel opens the front door. A smug look takes over his face when he sees us. “No Aubrey? And I’m assuming no hard drive?”

“Just take us to Ludo,” Rhett says impatiently. After their interaction last night, I’m surprised he’s not ruder. I have half a mind to kick Axel in the shins as I step past him and into the house.

“Wait here. And shut him up.” Axel glares at Huxley, who’s dissolved into tears, before sauntering away.

“Wait,” Huxley calls. “Please don’t do this to me.”

Axel turns and gives him a burning glare. Something passes between the two of them that I can’t figure out before Axel spins on his heel and disappears into the house.

Huxley sniffles. “I promise I didn’t take her. I promise.”

The image of Peter’s wife waving to him from their doorstep flits through my mind. Guilt slithers across my skin. She looked so happy.

“Just keep your mouth shut, and maybe he’ll let you live.” Most likely, I’m giving him false hope, but I don’t know how else to calm him down.

Once Ludo steps into the foyer followed by Axel, Huxley tries to run. And by *try,* I mean he’s barely able to take half a step in the direction of the front door. Rhett and I have too strong a hold on him.

Huxley stumbles and falls to his knees when Rhett shoves him forward. “Holloway, I didn’t kidnap your wife. I had nothing to do with this!”

“We couldn’t find Aubrey anywhere,” Elliot says, “and as you can see, he’s claiming that he had nothing to do with her disappearance.”

“Well, he’s telling the truth, isn’t he?” Ludo’s expression is almost indifferent as he pulls out his gun, aims it at Huxley’s head, and shoots.

Wait, what?

My ears are still ringing from the gunshot as a handful of men walk in. One of them shoves Andrew into the room, and Rhett goes completely still beside me.

Ludo gives us a vicious smirk. “I know it was you.”

Shit.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Rhett

“I have to admit, you three had me fooled.” Ludo’s voice is twisted with sick amusement. “But, I suppose, I had you fooled as well.”

Panic slides through my veins. Based on what Elliot told us, Ludo sounded desperate to get Aubrey back. It made perfect sense. He couldn’t let it get out that his wife was taken from right under his nose. It didn’t even cross my mind that he could’ve been setting us up.

My hand twitches at my side. We’re surrounded. There’s no way we can fight our way out of here and survive. Even if we did, we can’t leave Andrew and Benny behind. Not now.

“I’d like you to know, Brooks, that your brother sold you out. Your own flesh and blood.”

Hearing that is like a stab to the gut, but I keep my eyes fixed on Ludo. He still doesn’t know that we ran into Andrew in Florida when he should’ve been in his room. If Ludo finds out, it might be the last straw before he decides he’s done with Andrew. Betrayal or not, I can’t stand to see any harm come to him.

“Brother?” I croak. “I only had a little sister.”

Ludo’s smile is smug and cruel, and for the first time, I realize I may never get a chance to wipe it off his face. “That’s what you thought. But as it turns out, your father had two more sons after you.” Ludo gestures for Andrew to step forward.

When our gazes meet, guilt washes over Andrew’s face, but it’s gone in a split second. I survey the rest of the room but don’t find who I’m looking for.

Where’s Benny? What’s Ludo done to him?

“How the hell do you know this?” I demand.

“I knew I’d need leverage on you three soon, and after Wren’s kidnapping, she’s barely left your sight. I wasn’t ready to take her at Jordan’s, so I resolved to find someone else to use.” Holloway’s eyes slide to Oliver. “I thought about your family, but there’s something about threatening a child that makes people bend to your will so much easier.”

“Motherfucker,” Oliver mutters under his breath.

“Why do you need leverage?” Elliot asks. His voice is calm, but underneath that cool exterior, I know he has to be panicking.

“You’ll find out soon.” Ludo nods to a few of his men, who advance toward us. “Just know that if you try *anything*, I’ll kill both your brothers without a moment’s hesitation.”

As the weight of the situation settles over us, we move closer to each other. It won’t do any good, but I’m not sure any of us do it consciously.

“Ell,” Oliver whispers just as my fingers brush against his.

Don’t fight. Please, for the love of god, don’t fight.

“I’m sorry,” Elliot says to us as two men grab him. He doesn’t resist. “I should’ve—”

“Shut up,” Ludo snaps. “Unless you’re planning on telling me where Aubrey is—or where you’re keeping my hard drive—I don’t want to hear a word from you.”

“Aubrey already sold the drive,” Elliot says, “and she didn’t tell us where she was going in case something like this happened.”

Ludo’s eyes flash. “Who did she sell it to?”

“Don’t know,” Elliot says. “Our part of the deal was to help her get the drive and then help her get off the property. The rest was on Aubrey. You severely underestimated her.”

Please believe him.

“Maybe,” Ludo says with his eyes narrowed, “but you all underestimated me, as well.”

I clench my jaw as two of his men search me. My eyes lock onto Andrew, who’s staring at the ground. *How could he do this?* He knows just how cruel Ludo can be. Still, I can’t let anything happen to them, so I don’t put up a fight as my phone, my weapons, and even my shoes are taken from me.

“Axel,” Ludo says. “I want them guarded at all times. Keep your best men on it.”

“Got it, boss.”

“And send a team to retrieve Wren once they can do so unnoticed.”

My stomach drops. *Wren.*

“No,” Oliver shouts. He lunges for Ludo, but his guards catch him immediately and yank him back.

“Ol, don’t,” Elliot says, and his voice is so reserved that any hope I have left vanishes. “Don’t struggle.”

“They’ll kill her. They’ll—”

“Stop,” Ludo shouts, and when we look back to him, his gun is aimed directly at Andrew. “I already told you. Do exactly what I say, or Rhett’s brothers get hurt. Keep resisting, and maybe I *will* drag your family into this, Moore.”

Oliver freezes.

“If you didn’t want your loved ones to get hurt, then you should’ve thought twice before betraying me,” Ludo snarls. “And it was all for what? Some extra cash? I thought you three were smarter than that.”

My eyes narrow. He has to know. How could he not? He said he looked into our families, which means he learned about Sammy. Has he not put the pieces together? Does he not remember?

Ludo lowers his weapon. “Get them out of my sight. Andrew, help take your brother.”

I almost say something—almost ask Holloway if he remembers killing my sister. But as Andrew plus another man drag me in the opposite direction of Elliot and Oliver, I bite my tongue. Maybe it’s to our advantage that he doesn’t know.

“Rhett,” Oliver yells. He’s still struggling, even though he knows it’s useless. “Where are you taking him? Rhett, I—”

One of the men holding Oliver elbows him in the back hard enough that he loses his breath. “No talking.”

Elliot looks to me but doesn’t say anything. I’m not sure, but I’m pretty sure there are tears in his eyes.

He’s going to blame himself. He always does.

Andrew and his partner take me upstairs. Thanks to the blueprints we got, I know exactly where we are, and it doesn’t make any sense. When

they open the door to Aubrey's bedroom and shove me inside, my confusion only grows.

It looks like they've already cleaned the room of her things. The walk-in closet is empty, the bed is freshly made, and all the surfaces are free of any objects.

"What am I doing in here?" I ask.

"This is where you're staying," Andrew's partner replies.

Again, I look around. *What?* This room is fully furnished. There's a balcony, for fuck's sake. This isn't the type of room you hold a prisoner in.

"It's so Benny doesn't get upset," Andrew adds.

I whip around to face them. "Where is he?"

"Safe. That's all that matters right now."

Andrew's partner backs toward the door. "We should go."

The look in Andrew's eyes turns menacing. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Come on, man. You know Ludo doesn't want you alone with him."

"What Ludo doesn't know won't hurt him," Andrew says with a shrug. "I just want to give him a piece of my mind."

With an eye roll, his partner turns to leave. "Make it quick. I'm not getting in trouble over fucking family drama."

The second we're alone, Andrew's whole demeanor changes. He steps closer, and his voice is pleading as he whispers, "Rhett, I'm so sorry. I never wanted this to happen."

"Fuck you," I seethe. "Save your bullshit. It won't work on me."

"I mean it. I was supposed to stay with Benny in his room, but he fell asleep, and it was boring as hell. I was just doing a little exploring."

Even as I have to fight off the urge to punch Andrew, worry curls through me. He disobeyed direct orders *again?*

“I was across the hall from the billiard room when I heard a noise,” Andrew says. “I opened the door a crack, and when I saw Wren going inside, I didn’t know what else to do. I had to tell Ludo. But I didn’t think he’d—”

“Is it really that hard to keep your damn mouth shut?” I growl.

“Rhett, *please.* I was doing what I thought was best. Knowing his plan now, I was obviously wrong, but *I didn’t know.* You have to believe me.”

“What you thought was *best?”* I spit out. “What did you think Ludo would do, give us a lecture like we’re teenagers? He’s a cold-hearted murderer, Andrew. You knew. You fucking knew, and you didn’t care.”

“I swear, I had no idea,” he insists. “There’s been talk of a rat, and you didn’t seem to like that I’m working for him. So when I saw Wren, I thought maybe it was you four. I didn’t know who to trust—Ludo or you guys. And Ludo is the one who’s helping me get custody of Benny—or so I thought—so at the time, he seemed like the right option.”

“You almost got Wren killed.” My chest squeezes painfully at the reminder that she still might die.

“I waited until you guys had already left,” he says, his voice pleading. “I did everything I could.”

“If she dies because of you,” I say lowly, “there won’t be a single force on this planet strong enough to stop me from coming for you. If anything happens to Elliot or Oliver, I’ll tear you apart and feed you to the first pack of wild dogs I find. You understand?”

“I promise I didn’t mean for any of you to get hurt,” he whispers.

“Save it for someone who cares.”

“Just tell me what to do. I have to get Benny out of here. I didn’t know Ludo was planning on using him like this. If he dies because of me—fuck,

Rhett, I can’t let that happen.”

“Andrew,” his partner calls through the door. “Let’s go.”

“Fuck,” Andrew hisses. He grabs his hair and pulls as he makes one last attempt. “Rhett, I promise I’ll do whatever I can to help you get out. I’m not sure how, but—”

“Don’t bother.”

“I can’t leave you here!”

“Just punch me.”

“W-what?”

“Punch me, Andrew. You told your partner that you were giving me a piece of your mind. So make it fucking look like it.”

“But you don’t believe me. You just threatened me. What the fuck, Rhett, you’re—”

“Just do it.”

The helpless look in Andrew’s eyes reminds me of another boy. One who lost almost everything. One who almost gave up. One who maybe *should’ve* given up.

When his fist connects with my face, my mind goes blank for a blissful moment. The taste of blood coats my tongue and tears sting my eyes, but I don’t care.

“I’m sorry,” Andrew whispers hoarsely.

The irony of the situation isn’t lost on me. I got into this war to avenge one sibling, only to be betrayed by another.

“Get out.”

Andrew winces before crossing the room. He stops with his hand on the doorknob and doesn’t even look back as he asks, “I have a sister?”

My fingers ball into fists. “Had.”

“What happened to her?”

“Andrew,” his partner calls before shoving the door open. “Fucking *move*. You’re going to get caught.”

Finally, Andrew looks back with that question still shining in his eyes.

I don’t answer.

Once they’re gone, I move to the balcony doors and look out. I can see most of the yard from here. There’s a boy kicking around a ball near the entrance to a hedge maze that takes up a decent portion of the backyard, and my heart clenches when I realize who it is.

Benny.

My throat aches as I turn away.

I almost wish Ludo would’ve executed us. Not knowing where Elliot and Oliver are—or what’s being done to them—kills me almost as much as the cold, hard realization that there’s nothing I can do to help them.

I only know one thing, and it causes a cocktail of dread and fear to settle over me like a wet blanket.

Whatever Ludo has in store for us, it’ll be worse than hell.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Elliot

They separate us.

Of course they separate us.

I'm not sure why they drag Rhett off to the other side of the mansion, but my last look at him is filled with regret.

I should've suspected this from a mile away.

Holloway's men take us to the second floor via the back staircase, and they throw Oliver into what appears to be an empty room. When he realizes I'm not joining him, he tries to break past the guards.

"Ell—no! Please just give us a minute."

"No talking to each other," one of them snaps. He pushes Oliver back hard enough to make him stumble.

I'm barely able to mouth the words *I love you* before they slam the door in his face.

Considering I'm not putting up a fight, these guys are rather rough when they shove me into the room next to Oliver's. It's bare except for a mattress in the corner.

“Do we need to remind you of the consequences if you try to escape?” one of the men asks in a gruff voice.

“No.” It’s what I’m supposed to say, even if I’m not sure I believe it.

My gaze flicks to the windows. One of them is even open, for fuck’s sake. I don’t doubt for a second that it’s intentional. Holloway isn’t even in the room, but he’s still found a way to taunt me.

Oliver is so close yet completely unreachable.

Escape would be so easy if not for the consequences.

And I’m sure Ludo has plans to make this a thousand times worse by adding Wren into the picture.

My stomach roils at the thought.

She’ll be fine.

Most likely, the team that’s being sent to capture her won’t leave until nightfall. Wren will figure out by then that something is wrong, and she’ll contact Finn. She may have gotten kidnapped under his watch once, but he won’t let it happen again.

As long as she has him, she’s safe. I have to believe that.

Ludo’s men leave the room, and I clench my jaw when they don’t even lock the door behind them.

They know I won’t try it.

My mind hasn’t completely caught up with our situation yet. I thought that by now, we’d be on our way home—or at least that we’d still be on Holloway’s good side. This is so far off from my expectations that it feels like I’m living in a dream.

It can’t be real, can it?

How did I not even consider that this could’ve been a trap?

We have to find a way out of here.

Leverage. Leverage means Holloway still needs something from us. I'm not sure what he's planning on forcing us to do, but I'll find a way to turn it against him. I have to.

For now, I'll cooperate. We've been rendered hopeless, so I don't have much of a choice, but I won't let it stay like that for long.

Resting my forehead against the wall that separates me from Oliver, I close my eyes. I can't talk to him—that'd only alert the guards and piss them off. It feels stupid, but I place my hands against the faded paint, hoping he can feel me.

I'll find a way to get us home.

I promise.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Wren

I think I might have *actually* worn down the carpet in the living room from pacing so much.

For the umpteenth time, I check the clock. It's been almost two hours since the guys said they'd be back. Maybe that's normal, but I'm not sure. I don't really know much about the inner workings of being a hitman, but I assume sometimes jobs take longer than anticipated.

Or they're dead.

Just the thought has my chest tightening. I need them to come home safe. We got away with last night, but what if Ludo got angry that the guys showed up without Aubrey? Or what if they missed some key detail, and Huxley's men got the better of them?

I pull out my phone. A couple days ago, I gave it to Ell, and he did a bunch of stuff to it. Mainly, he connected it to the house's security system so I get alerts when someone comes onto the property. I check my notifications before the little bit of hope I was harboring deflates. *Nothing.*

I texted Rhett an hour ago. He always keeps his phone on silent even when he's not working a job, so I knew I wouldn't be disturbing him if he was in the middle of something. But it's been long enough that I'm beginning to worry.

After opening my contacts list, my thumb hovers over Finn's name. Elliot told me to call him if they didn't make it back, but what qualifies as not making it back? In the grand scheme of things, maybe two hours isn't that big of a deal.

Oh, fuck it, I need his opinion.

Finn picks up on the first ring. "What's wrong?"

I give him a quick rundown of the day's events. "It's about two hours past when the guys said they'd be back. Is that—um, is that normal? For things to take longer than anticipated?"

"Sometimes," Finn says, "but . . . fuck. Two hours? And you haven't heard from them at all?"

"No. I texted Rhett an hour ago, but I still haven't heard back." I chew on my bottom lip while I wait for Finn to say something. When he doesn't, I ask, "Do you think they're in trouble?"

"They would've contacted you if they weren't."

My blood runs cold.

"I'm coming over," Finn says. "Stay put, and don't let anyone in the house except me."

For the next twenty minutes, I do nothing but stand in the middle of the living room and stare at my phone. The air feels thinner, like someone sucked all the oxygen out of the atmosphere. I can't catch my breath no matter how hard I try to.

The guys have always been open with me about the fact that they make mistakes. They may be excellent at their jobs, but that doesn't mean they're not human. The idea that *this* is the one that goes wrong, though . . . it can't be. It just *can't.*

My screen lights up with a notification that someone is coming up the driveway. Hope floods my veins, but it dissipates as quickly as it came. If it was one of the guys, the notification would say so, but it doesn't.

With a sigh, I move to the front of the house and peer out the window. Finn's vehicle comes into view just as I receive an incoming call from him.

"Hello?"

"Can you open the garage door?"

"Um. Sure." I end the call and pull up the security app that Elliot downloaded the other day. It's a little weird, being able to open the garage door with a tap of my finger, but maybe I'll get used to it eventually.

By the time Finn has pulled in, I've made my way across the mansion and into the kitchen. The rumble of the garage door closing fills the empty house as Finn passes through the mudroom and into the kitchen.

His dark hair is disheveled, and his lips are pressed into a thin, straight line. Something glimmers in his eyes—concern, maybe?—but he squashes it quickly.

"Where's the hard drive?" he asks.

"In the safe in Ell's office, I think."

Without another word, Finn spins on his heel and heads in that direction. I scurry to keep up, waiting for him to give me an explanation, but he doesn't speak.

I frown as he punches in the code to open Elliot's safe.

"What are you doing?"

“Making a backup.” He grabs the drive, slides into Elliot’s chair, and logs onto his computer with a few strokes on the keyboard.

“And how do you know how to get into Elliot’s stuff?”

“I know how to get into all their stuff.” Finally, he glances up. “You don’t?”

In the back of my mind, a memory plays. Something about Oliver suggesting stuff like this. Updating emergency contacts, adding me to accounts, and making sure I could access everything in case something like this happened. Last I knew, the guys had started the process, but other things took priority.

“We were . . . working on it.”

“I’ll write everything down for you to memorize,” Finn says absentmindedly. He’s already back to work, pulling a spare hard drive out of his jacket pocket before plugging both drives into the computer. “Right now, we need to make sure this information stays safe.”

“Shouldn’t we try to find the guys? What if they need help?”

Finn’s expression is grim as he looks up from the monitor. “It’s already too late.”

No. How could he know that? He can’t, right? Not for sure, at least.

But Finn nods toward Elliot’s second monitor, and hesitantly, I make my way around the desk.

He has a map pulled up, and there are three blue dots blinking on the screen. If I hadn’t spent so much time studying the blueprints, I probably wouldn’t recognize the building from a bird’s-eye view.

My blood pressure spikes. “That’s Ludo’s mansion.”

“And those dots are their phones,” Finn says. “So either they’re having a long conversation with Ludo about their next steps—in which case, one of

them would've texted you an updated arrival time—or he's found them out somehow. In which case . . ."

"Don't," I whisper. "Please don't say it out loud."

A vein pulses above Finn's right eyebrow. "Run me through everything that happened yesterday. Don't leave anything out—not even the tiny details."

As I do, his expression goes from a light frown to a disturbed one. It more or less sends any hope I have left down the drain.

"As far as you're aware," Finn says once I'm done explaining, "Axel had no prior reason to suspect you or the guys?"

"Correct. According to the conversation Oliver overheard, Axel's accusation of us being Ludo's rat was only because we were present during Aubrey's attempted kidnapping. Oh, and that I got close to her."

"Odd," Finn murmurs. "You'd think he would spend his energy on more likely suspects." He only sits with the thought for a moment before moving on. "You're sure you're not forgetting anything?"

"Positive. Running into Axel was the closest I got to getting caught."

"Hmm." Finn narrows his eyes. "It's possible someone saw you but you didn't see them. Or maybe Holloway's aversion to technology is all a ruse, and he caught something on camera."

My eyes slide back to the monitor. "How do we know for sure? That they're in trouble, that is?"

Finn checks his watch. "Honestly, I'm surprised we haven't gotten confirmation yet."

"What do you mean?"

"I've never met Ludo, but I've learned a lot about him through the guys. He likes to draw out his punishments. For the guys, that means hurting

Rhett’s brothers, torturing the three of them, and . . .”

“Hurting me,” I finish quietly.

Finn nods solemnly. “I’ve been waiting for you to get a text from one of the guys’ phones luring you to Ludo’s mansion. But nothing’s come through, right?”

“Right.” My knees feel oddly weak, so I lean against the desk. “Is there any chance you’re wrong? That maybe they’re just too distracted to text me?”

“They wouldn’t forget.”

“But maybe—”

“They wouldn’t forget.” Finn’s voice is firm, and I almost miss the undercurrent of irritation. “Has there ever been a moment where they didn’t consider how their actions would affect you?”

All the air rushes from my lungs. He’s right. Since day one, they’ve always made sure to take my wellbeing into account.

“We can find them, right? We can find a way to get them out of there?”

“Right now, we need to focus on your safety,” Finn replies. “That and making sure this information stays in our hands.”

I perk up. “Can we use it? Could we blackmail Ludo into handing the guys over?”

Finn shakes his head. “Ludo would only retaliate. Either by killing one of the guys or Andrew or Benny.”

“Then what can we do?” I ask desperately.

“Wait.”

“For what?”

A *ping* sounds from my pocket, and Finn’s gaze locks on my phone as I check the notification.

Unknown vehicle detected in driveway.

“That,” Finn says.

When I look up from my screen, he’s already out of the chair. He places the original hard drive back in the safe and slips the other into the inside pocket of his jacket.

“You know who it is?” I ask.

“We’ve already been over this,” he says impatiently. “Hurting you hurts the guys. You’re a sitting duck—or, you would be if I wasn’t here.”

My eyes widen as I glance out the window. It doesn’t face the front of the house, so it doesn’t do any good. “He’s coming for me.”

“I’m going to need you to stay calm,” Finn says as he drags me through the house. “We’ll see how large the team is that he sent and come up with a plan from there. Most likely, it’s small. No one’s expecting you to put up much of a fight.”

The house is mostly dark, but the nightlights the guys bought illuminate our path well enough. Once we’re near the front door, Finn peeks out the window. He swears under his breath.

“There are three men.” He pulls a knife from his pocket and presses it onto my palm. “You’ll need this.”

“W-what?” I can’t help the way my voice is laced with panic as Finn stoops down and pulls a second knife from his boot.

“Just listen. We don’t have a lot of time.” He pushes me so I’ll be behind the door when it opens. “Wait until all three of them are inside. It’s dark enough that they won’t see us. I’ll take the guy in the back, and you take the middle one. You’ll have to—”

“What about the guy in the front?”

“Shut *up*, Wren,” he hisses. “I’ll handle him once I’ve taken out the first guy. But I won’t be able to help you, okay? We need to keep one of them alive to try to get any information we can. I can kill the first guy quickly, but subduing the third and keeping him conscious will take me extra time. You have to act fast, and you absolutely *cannot* hesitate.”

Heavy footsteps sound on the sidewalk that leads to the front door. Oh my god. *Oh my god.*

“Stay low,” Finn tells me quietly. “You’re going to use the knife to cut as hard and deep as you can at the back of his leg. Get the back of his knee or his Achilles tendon, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper.

“He’ll fall, and then you need to slit his throat. Hard and deep, okay? Don’t leave any chance of survival.”

Can I do that? Can I kill someone?

Fuck, it’s self-defense, Wren. You have to. This is what you prepared yourself for.

“Wren,” Finn whisper-shouts.

“I’ve got it.” I step back and lower myself into a crouching position.

As we listen to them pick the lock, I carefully open the knife. My heart has never beat this fast before.

“You’ve got this,” Finn whispers to me. “Just don’t think too hard about it.”

Lucky for me, I don’t have *time* to think too hard. The door flies open, and three men run into the dark room. Finn grabs the last guy just as I slash the back of the second one’s leg. He cries out before falling to his knees.

My hands are shaking, but I don’t stop. I scramble to my feet, grab his hair from behind, and yank him backward. The knife slides across his throat

much easier than it did his leg, and I shudder as blood spurts onto my hand.

“Motherfucker,” Finn grunts. “Wren, get the lights.”

I do so as quickly as I can. The lights illuminate a chilling scene—two dead men, blood everywhere, and Finn wrestling with the third guy, who’s on top of him.

Shit. He’s fighting for the upper hand, but he’s struggling.

I don’t even think. I just grab a vase from a small shelf by the door, dump out the water and flowers, and smash it over the guy’s head. The porcelain shatters as he cries out. The impact isn’t enough to knock him out, but it still disorients him.

Finn dismounts him, rolls to his feet, and pulls out his gun in a matter of seconds. “Stay down,” he grunts. “Wren, get something to tie him up with.”

“Got it.” I pick my way across the room, careful not to step on any of the shards littering the floor.

My heart sinks. *That was one of Oliver’s favorite vases.*

As I run upstairs, I set the thought aside. We can get him a new vase, but right now, I need to focus on helping Finn.

I grab a couple bundles of rope from Elliot’s room and dash downstairs. Finn is still holding the man at gunpoint.

“Tie him up,” Finn tells me.

I start off cautiously, half-expecting him to attack me at any moment. But apparently, having a gun pointed at his head is enough of a deterrent. He doesn’t resist as I tie his feet together and then bind his hands behind his back.

“Look,” the guy says, “I’ll tell you everything I know. You don’t have to hurt me.”

Finn’s eyes narrow, and he doesn’t move to lower his weapon even though the guy is restrained now. “What’s Holloway’s plan?”

“All I know is that we were told to bring her back to his mansion.” He nods to me. “It was supposed to be an easy job. We thought you were alone.”

My stomach flips at the realization that I almost *was* alone. What would’ve happened if—

Stop. Thinking like that won’t do any good.

“Is that where Ludo is keeping the guys?” I ask. “At the mansion?”

“I don’t know. I wouldn’t keep them in the place I sleep, but maybe that’s Ludo’s plan. He has the manpower to have them under lock and key.”

“What’s he planning on doing with Rhett’s brothers?”

The mention of Benny and Andrew causes an unbearable ache to bloom in my chest. Rhett got the closest he’s ever been to being united with his brothers, only for Ludo to tear them from his grasp.

Finn’s voice fades. We were all so close. With the hard drive in our hands, everything was supposed to go smoothly from here. But now, I don’t know anymore.

As tears prick my eyes, I take a step back. My heel hits the arm of the man I killed, unmoving yet still warm. I stumble away, and my stomach turns as I stare at the bodies. Blood pools from underneath them, seeping into the wooden flooring.

Two minutes of planning and one of action—now I’m a killer.

A shiver runs up my spine. Taking that man’s life was so . . . *easy.*

I’ve never thought of humans as fragile. A single person can accomplish so much and accrue so much power that they almost become invincible. But

all it takes is one properly placed blade, and everything comes crashing to the ground.

My gaze drifts across the room to my knife. At some point I dropped it, although I don't remember when.

". . . please just let me go. I don't know anything else. I'm just a low-level grunt, that's all."

My attention snaps back to the interrogation. I didn't realize I zoned out. "You were going to kidnap me and bring me to a man who wants to torture and kill me, and you think we're going to *let you go?"*

"I . . ." His voice is weak, and his eyes turn pleading as he realizes he doesn't have a good excuse. "Please—"

"Do you have any more questions for him?" I ask Finn without breaking eye contact.

"We've gotten everything out of him that we're going to," he replies.

A familiar feeling creeps through me. The first time I felt it, I'd just woken up in a hospital bed to find the man I feared most standing over me.

Back then, I dismissed it. Now, it's so strong that I couldn't ignore it if I wanted to.

I move across the room slowly, still not taking my eyes off my would-be kidnapper. He swallows audibly as I stoop down and retrieve my bloody knife.

Rhett once told me they'd burn the world to the ground if they ever lost me. At the time, I believed him. I still do. But what I didn't realize then—or until right now, really—is that I'll do the same to get them back to me, too.

I love them so much it hurts.

And nothing—*fucking nothing*—will get in the way of me bringing them home.

The story continues in Ruthless Desires 6.

Join my Facebook group for exclusive teasers and other fun! ***Tap here*** *or search "Elira Firethorn Reader Group" on FB.*

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Author's Note

Thanks so much for reading Cruel Betrayal! The story will continue in Ruthless Desires 6, which will be the last book in the series.

I think it’s important to note that my partner helped shape the plot for this book so much that I can’t claim it as my own. My love, thank you so much for all our conversations and all your input—and for not giving up when I failed to communicate what I needed.

A special thank you to my sensitivity and beta readers—Ruthie, Yolanda, and Maycie. You all helped make this book so much better and gave me reassurance when my confidence dropped.

If you’d like to stay up to date with my latest writings and adventures, you can check out my website elirafirethorn.com or follow me on **Instagram, Pinterest,** and **TikTok** @elirafirethorn.

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